

AVATAR SKIN(S): AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
JOURNEY TO MY PLACE
OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to three sources of support and inspiration:

My parents, who were never able to realize their Depression-era dreams of education, but held that vision for my sister and me.

My maternal grandparents, who immigrated to the United States and were passionate about American opportunity, citizenship, and education.

And to friends and teachers, who for whatever reason, simply tried to help a troubled life.

I am a better teacher for their efforts.

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Abstract: This autoethnography presents the avatar as a liberating learning platform for those who live on the edges of hegemonic and heteronormative society. I call this platform “avatar as place of education.” I illustrate how my avatar was a place for processing self-learning (learning about myself) by recounting and exploring my queer identity development through my experiences as student, educator, and gamer traveling between virtual and physical worlds. I write to inquire and to seek to achieve an understanding of my avatar place and my emotional response to marginalization as a lesbian. To craft this autoethnography, I draw data from physical world memories, journals, photographs, and from in-world experiences in Second Life (SL). I situate this project in educational technology and draw from women’s and gender studies, and from studies about place, virtual gaming characters, “avatars,” and avatar customization to inform my analysis.

I conceptualize avatar as place of education because they: first, exercise agency for their physical world counterparts and vice/versa; second, may become deliberate through changing avatars, third, have educative meaning and value for all individuals but may serve as an especially crucial aspect of education for marginalized youth; fourth, relate reciprocally and teach the user through feedback and transfer. Lastly, users’ intentional creations of avatar places have potential value as an avenue to experience virtual world choices about social norms, identity, and community. Avatar places offer self-education, self-creation and self-knowledge possibilities for many people exploring aspects of their identity, especially for those marginalized in society.

This study contributes to research regarding player needs, avatar customizations, and game design, and reinforces research that details the heteronormative affordances of North American game design which exclude culturally and sexually marginalized students from personal identity options in avatar interfaces (Consalvo, 2012; Ducheneaut, Wen & Yee, 2009; Nakamura, 2002, 2013; Pulos, 2013; Schmieder, 2009; Taylor, 2003). Virtual world participation helps negotiate heteronormative practices. My work also extends discourse about queer-friendly opportunities and practices in schools. This work is productive in arguing for commercial virtual worlds in formal education to meet the needs of 21st century technology skills.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. EDUCATIVE VALUE OF AVATAR	1
Purpose	7
Qualitative Research.....	9
Why Autoethnography?	12
Why Second Life?.....	16
Why Avatars	19
Bringing My Research into Focus.....	20
Exploring Relevant Scholarship.....	20
Schemata.....	21
Means	23
Story of Avatar Development	27
Tutorial: SL and Avatar Design.....	32
Relocating My Avatar Researcher: Ethnographer to Autoethnographer	38
Places of Education: Backyards, Bulletin Boards, and Beyond	41
Growing Up Different: Odd Girl <i>In</i> and <i>Out</i>	51
Mediated Identity: My Body, My Self (Hatred and Joy)	55
Hiding Places: Home, School & Church.....	60
Home	60
School.....	61
Church.....	69
The Importance of Growing Up in Community.....	78
Online Gaming: Situating myself <i>In</i> and <i>Out</i>	88
Exploring a Corner of the Metaverse: Designed Shared Spaces	94
II. PLACE IN CONTEXT: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON	
AVATARS.....	100
III. STORYING THE LITERATURE OF AVATAR INTERSECTION	108
The Meaning of Place.....	108

Moving About in Places	112
IV. AVATAR AS PLACE OF EDUCATION: A PLATFORM FOR LEARNING.....	117
Affordances and Constraints	117
Avatar Intersections.....	119
Teaching, Culture and Successful Teaching Outcomes	121
Virtual Worlds and the Place of Avatar.....	128
Credibility in Context.	130
V. FINAL REFLECTIONS: MEANING AND DISCOVERIES	135
My Turn.....	136
Self-Representation.....	138
Self-Queering.....	139
Avatar-Place.....	141
Rethinking Design Codes.....	142
A View From the Other Side.....	143
VI. NEW JOURNEYS: EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND PROCESSES	145
Feminist by Design	146
Facing Interfaces.....	147
Extending Curriculum: Practicing Cultures In Virtual Worlds.....	148
Concluding Musings	150
REFERENCES	155
APPENDIX	191
Glossary	191

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1	Apartment and Grounds in Second Life	2
2	Exterior of Ram's Apartment in Second Life.....	3
3	Interior Views in Second Life.....	4
4	Body Customization in Second Life.....	35
5	Second Life Market Place	36
6	Church of My Youth.....	69
7	Images of Holy Angels Church in Second Life.....	74
8	No Longer a Red Head.....	154

PREFACE

This work details my journey through the multi-contextual tangles of growing up *different* with each insight reflecting a strand woven in the web of my life. Growing up lesbian positioned me in many of the same emotional battles faced by today's LGBTQ youth in and out of school situations. I was a high-risk adolescent who many years later as an adult found hope and positive feelings about myself resulting from relationships and self-learning from participating in online gaming. In Second Life, I am my avatar. I am a performer (lesbian, marginalized, gamer) and researcher in shared and fluid cultures. Reflecting on my relationship with my avatar, like the artistic genres of video and film, expands my understanding about myself while in turn, shaping readers understanding of avatar as place and the value of such place as a power to influence others. In this document, I use font changes and asterisks that signal my transition between my physical world and Second Life.

Autoethnography as an interpretive methodology is a form of qualitative research focused on narrating the Self-in-Culture. Working in this qualitative genre affords me the opportunity to foreground my experiences as a site of broader learning about culture, and to cross borders and combine work in educational technology, virtual worlds women and gender studies, and place-making adding a unique conceptual approach to this project.

CHAPTER 1

EDUCATIVE VALUE OF AVATAR

*What if you had the freedom to be whoever you wanted to be,
and live out your wildest dreams and fantasies day after day?
That is exactly what online Virtual Worlds, such as Second Life,
offer people now. But even avatars have their secrets, secrets
about their online personas which they were afraid to tell
anyone else before. These secrets can be so embarrassing that they
don't even mention them to their own virtual world friends.
Their real world friends might ridicule them even more.
These secrets may never see the light of day. Until now.*

Avatar Secrets (2012)

* * *

In my first world it is late afternoon, in Second Life (SL) I have a separate circadian cycle. The sun is rising and a combination of pinks and blues usher in the morning. In this three-dimensional virtual world published by Linden Labs, my apartment complex is one of many lands and communities. Research Simnah (RS), the avatar representing me, teleports to the entrance of a sprawling

apartment complex set in a grassy expanse. I close my eyes and I can almost smell the neatly manicured lush green grass along the stepping-stone pathways, and feel the coolness provided by the large shade trees housing scores of singing birds. RS follows one of many stepping stone paths meandering through the apartment complex. Each apartment building looks like the rest. As we walk through the complex there seems to be an oddness about this place. I



Figure 1. Apartment and grounds in Second Life

notice an absence of laundry facilities, parking areas, and facility maintenance personnel, ubiquitous in first world complexes of this size. RS tries to find the apartment of a friend, another of my avatars, named Ram S. She quickly makes her way past several landscaped water features; some adorned with bench seats, others with stone rock gardens and sculptures. Rows of uniform light brown buildings are indistinguishable except for the large apartment numbers prominently displayed above entrances. Passing by resident patios adorned with items such as plants, yard ornaments, and patio décor, RS meanders along the stepping-stone paths looking for Ram's apartment. At this intersection of the physical world and Second Life, RS and I seem to breathe and move together. I am in my avatar. I am no longer looking in at the figure on a moving screen as if I

were a voyeur looking through a window; I am the figure on the screen—one with the machine.

RS reaches Ram's apartment and pauses. Ram's given permission so all RS needs to do to gain entry is a point-and-click of my mouse. SL Avatars need only point-and-click at objects to activate them. Such point-and-click design features (affordances) enable users a means of personal controls. Affordances are available for personal space development, avatar customization, and actions. Point-and-click controls door knobs, blind cords, windows, and light switches in this manner, unlike first world conventions. I give permission to activate the object by pointing at it. My feedback is a glowing, effervescent animation that emanates from my avatar's hand followed by a visual of the object moving.



Figure 2. Exterior views of Ram's apartment in Second Life

Ram's apartment is "L" shaped with the L to the right of the door. I enter a space that is open and airy. The large apartment living area has linear etched tile flooring and several tropical plants. A five-hundred-gallon fish tank (by physical world standards) acts as a room divider sectionalizing the open floor plan. Colorful tropical fish swim about the tank. I pass and notice a soothing low level humming and the sound of water created by the pump and filter. Along the

back wall, a free-standing fireplace intersects corners of two smooth plaster, long walls. The long wall directly left of the main entrance has a floor to ceiling window with vertical blinds, moving to the right side along the back wall. The wall opposite the windows is textured white plaster. To the right of that same wall, a vertical window serves as the site of an additional entryway outside onto a shared patio space and on the interior leading to the L space. Black leather furniture surrounds the edges of rectangular rugs, brightened by soft area lighting. Ram's place has only two solid walls, one in each section. On the right of

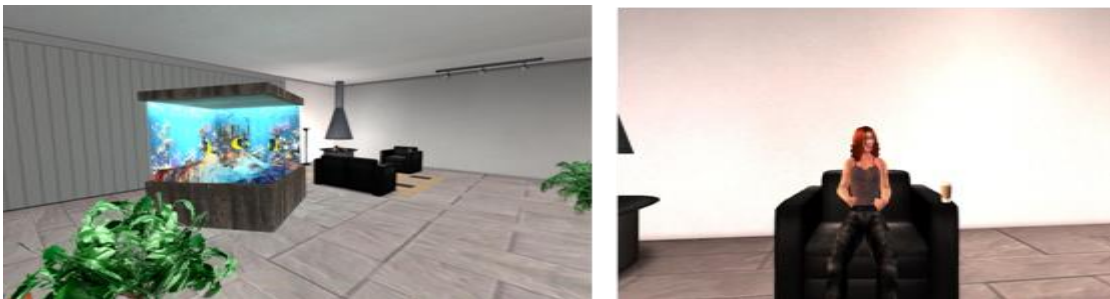


Figure 3. Interior views in Second Life

the entrance is a windowed wall similar to the other side of the apartment. It too intersects with a textured white plaster wall. In the L, the white wall features a black-and-white triadic black-and-white depiction of two leafless trees with intertwined roots and swaying branches, giving an appearance of two faces with flowing hair. The area rugs are exact replicas of one in Ram's first life home.

RS is in her apartment looking toward the front door. From the other side of the screen, I watch RS sitting in her black leather easy chair. A wisp of steam snakes upward from of her cup of coffee perched on the armrest. As I watch RS, I

sit at my computer thinking about the cup of yesterday's cold coffee sitting on my desk in front of me. I drink it black and like it cold. I take a sip of coffee and gaze through the screen at my second self, my avatar and her coffee. Although I refer to her coffee, I think it may be more accurate to say 'our' coffee. At this moment, I feel suspended somewhere between my first-life and my life in Second Life. Looking out through her eyes and looking in through the screen I feel boundaries blend and fade. RS is an interlocutor in my story as I am in hers. In my avatar, I have become the person that those in my first world consider a marginalized adult. Here, within the comfort of an avatar of my creation, I am exactly the person I want to be in both worlds. My avatar is certainly not perfect, but she is an adult without secrets or anything to fear.

* * *

The process of tinkering with options, forming and reforming my avatar body is over. I feel a connection to my creation. RS's body looks acceptable to me though I could not fashion her exactly the way I saw her in my mind's eye. I am comfortable in her despite Second Life body design constraints preventing me from achieving Second Life avatar perfection. I gaze through the screen examining RS. My mind wanders between thinking about Linden designers, and online game and virtual world literature about the power structures and gamers' inclusivity absent in Role-playing Games (RPGs). My gaze, fixed on the animated steam rising from my cup of coffee, momentarily forces me out of my comfort zone. I realize for a brief moment that I am in my fantasy. I am thinking all the while, "I never drink anything that has steam rising from it." I wish I had more control over the avatar customization affordances. For now, I have choices to make:

delete or deal with the steam. Regardless of what I feel and how I negotiate, I am a player in another's design, a spectator embroiled in a power hierarchy with the game owners. I cannot change what is not mine to change any more than RS can cool her coffee.

In the game spaces I frequent, most gamers with whom I play, know these power dynamics too. Settling for another's design feels as if I must sell a part of my soul for the exciting experience games have to offer. This settling for another's design is a constant, sometimes painful, negotiation between what I want and what the avatar design offers. SL differs from online games that focus on competition. SL claims an open code, which gives the illusion of endless possibilities. Designers and developers *give* players the feeling of agency and freedom associated with their open design structure. However, a power structure lurks behind Linden's digital curtain, a group of paid human designer-developers producing and marketing Linden's brand, all moving and manipulating SL in Linden's vision.

A few years ago I created a research avatar (RS) for a pilot study conducted entirely in Second Life. RS and I interviewed Second Life avatars who self-identified as marginalized adults in their first world. I did not uncover new and profound understandings of marginalization or sexual identity but did come to realize I was becoming immersed in their stories. I felt my life stories interconnected and intertwined with theirs. When I asked about their schooling experiences their responses left me with a profound, painful memory of my schooling experiences wishing for an educational place independent of hegemonic, normative performance standards. This feeling of connection to people who shared fundamental values, ideas, and desires, offered a sense of belonging to a community with whom I identified. My sense of belonging and community echoed

throughout participants' reflections in that pilot and from other interactions I have had in these virtual spaces. Had we had virtual places of discovery, places where we could fail without consequence, learn to negotiate culture in our middle and secondary school years—and where we were pain-free from teasing and bullying—our education might have been a positive experience rather than a painful endurance contest.

Purpose

*“We cannot move theory into action unless
we can find it in the eccentric and wandering
ways of our daily life . . .
[Stories] give theory flesh and breath.”*

Pratt, 1995, p. 22

This dissertation focuses on the journey of one marginalized life, my own. I trace my first life marginalization negotiating life in a double bind as gay outsider mired in *straight* culture. This avatar place serves to project and situate transformative links connecting users' physical world and virtual world self-learning and self-acceptance.

In this process, I reflect on my first life educational experiences in school, early adulthood, teaching, and my later experiences with an avatar as place to consider the opportunities that contemporary avatars offer in high graphics 21st century game avatar design for exploring the self. I wish that such opportunities had existed earlier in my life. To have had a place to explore and create free of critical and painful feedback might have provided possibilities for positive discovery and learning. My avatar-place could have been a safe and protected educational space to explore my reality. With an avatar and Second Life to which to turn, my school days might have been days of positive self-

learning, rather than days of debasement. Based on these reflections, I suggest that conceptualizing avatar as place of education has potential as a place of learning for all individuals, but may serve as an especially crucial aspect of education for marginalized youth.

Finally, I point to broader implications of the avatar as place for considering social agency and socio-cultural constraints (Reed-Danahay, 2009). This work suggests that if avatar personas are places of learning, design affordances, constraints, and conventions might influence avatar's real world counterparts. How might this new understanding add to the knowledge of virtual learning spaces, virtual communities, game and game avatar design, and the potential use of virtual worlds in school settings as avatar-places of learning to navigate their identity? I accomplish this through critiquing current design approaches to avatar construction suggesting that there is educative value where design offers a conscious, user-driven creation of avatar-place for particular, educative means rather than leaving the user creators construction of avatar-place to chance. I suggest through story and literature that avatar construction in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) and virtual worlds represents cultural reproduction perspectives of the game industry executives and designers. Through my avatar experiences, I demonstrate that avatars as education place and virtual worlds educate users in ways of negotiating the *self*. I further illustrate the need for users to take first steps learning to navigate design affordances, constraints and conventions and, in so doing, learn to experience and negotiate norms in new ways. Users' intentional creations of avatars as places of education merit study for their educative meaning and potential value as an avenue to experience in-world choices about social norms, identity,

and community and learning without personal risk. Avatar-places offer self-education, self-creation, and self-knowledge possibilities for many people exploring aspects of their identity, especially for those marginalized in society.

Considering my avatar-place in SL through autoethnography raises a series of questions to consider about broader issues in culture and constructions, the relationship of what I have come to experience and demonstrate as my avatar-place: How has my avatar design and utilization allowed me to understand the avatar as a place of education? What are my experiences inworld and outworld, as one who self-identifies as marginalized? How did my avatar, then my avatar-place, mitigate my marginalization? I ask a global question: what might avatar as place of education look like for marginalized youth? The present work speculates that if avatar persona are places of learning then design affordances, constraints and conventions influence avatars adding to the knowledge of avatar customization and inclusive design methods and use of virtual world play as a mainstream classroom learning tool.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research brings a humanness to research that is missing in quantitative research. Qualitative research encompasses varied forms of social inquiry that can employ interpretive, naturalistic, critical, or poststructuralist approaches and use multiple methods to explore its subject matter. The researcher often studies or interprets phenomena through the lens of those studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005), and focuses on human perceptions, experiences, and cultural processes. Ethnography, a form of qualitative research, is the study of culture.

Qualitative educational research foremothers and forefathers from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Margaret Mead & Willard Waller) sought to make qualitative research as rigorous as quantitative research. Efforts expanded and continued in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Herbert Blumer, Barney Glasser, Anselm Strauss, & Howard Becker). Present day senior scholars of my generation (e.g., Norman Denzin, Yvonne Lincoln, Gaile Canella, A. Jean Clandinen, F. Michael Connely, & John Cresswell) were likely pursuing undergraduate or graduate coursework or newly teaching during the time I was in my undergraduate teacher education program.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, qualitative inquiry was unknown to me. My undergraduate studies in biology, physical education and educational tests and measurement were based in quantitative research. I do not remember if qualitative inquiry was even a research option my educational programs offered at the time. Subsequent teaching experience, grant work and research I conducted in the late 1970s on youth physical fitness, and early graduate studies in exercise physiology, were also heavily statistical and quantitative. I was led to believe that quantitative research was the gold standard in my field.

When I returned to graduate school in 2007, I had little knowledge and no experience with qualitative research. I entered a Master's program more than four decades after attaining my baccalaureate degree and during the intervening years qualitative research had achieved recognition in education. In my first qualitative research course, the instructor required a reading titled *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/Aids* (1997). The authors were a feminist psychologist, Chris Smithies, and a feminist educational researcher, Patti Lather. The text was ten years old at the time,

and I was a brand new graduate student. This ethnographic study presented stories of women living with HIV against the background of the social stigma and global anxiety associated with HIV infection in the late 1980s and 1990s when treatment was limited and ineffective. What was this *mess* of ethnography, angels, inter-text, factoids, and researcher reflexivity constituting the text? I was immediately turned-off and a bit put-out by my professor requiring such a book. I could not understand how research had changed. Could this disjointed, disruptive layout of angel facts, women's stories, and epidemiological statistics constituting the text be acceptable as research?

It took a while before I realized that I was in the presence of greatness. Qualitative research was a diverse body of work underpinned by broad paradigms (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lather, 2013). *Troubling the Angels* was not just an ethnographic account of women living with HIV/AIDS, it was a brave undertaking in which the researchers emerged as thinking, breathing sojourners on intertwined and divergent paths *with* and *as* subjects. When the researchers reflected on their inquiry and their position within that inquiry, they chose not to keep those reflections buried and mute as positivist standards required. Smithies and Lather provided spaces for their participants' voices enriching our understanding of the entire phenomena: what it means to be *living* with HIV; what it is like to conduct research in the midst of stigmatizing disease and death. They represented their research graphically with abrupt statements of epidemiologic facts while metaphoric and textual depictions of angels swooped in and rose up to provide scripted intermission. I became a voyeur in Lather and Smithies' work, seeing their thoughts, opinions, and positions, all of which reflected a thick, rich analysis

of their data. Their field notes exposed their personal thoughts giving us glimpses into their own stories.

Why Autoethnography?

*“Autoethnographies place personal experience within
social and cultural contexts and raise provocative questions
about social agency and socio-cultural constraints.”*

Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 28

Autoethnography is a methodology of discovery that relies on writing to think, writing to learn; it involves three key components that a researcher might emphasize in different ways in a given study: auto (self) ethno (culture) graphy (process) (Reed-Danahay, 2009). Autoethnography incorporates the personal experiences of the researcher qua participant. While ethnography is a methodology that involves a way of looking and a way of seeing the world (Wolcott, 2008) that focuses on culture, auto (ethnography) focuses on exploring the *I* (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010) in relation to context and culture. Highlighting written researcher experience as a central focus and data source is a core difference between ethnography and autoethnography requiring a visceral, reflective account of experiences ordinarily reported from the semi-disengaged stance of participant-observer in ethnographic studies. The researcher's personal experiences, however, imagined and theorized, serve as primary data (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). This particular type of research employs personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno) by systematically analyzing the experience of the researcher through writing (graphy) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography positions researcher and others in three possible positions: *self* as the main character, self and

others as co-participants, and others as the primary focus and also providing entry to the researcher's world (Chang, 2008). In this study, I employ a lived experience approach to telling my story, positioning myself as the main character and others as supporting actors in my story.

Autoethnography as a methodology offers me the opportunity to draw from personal knowledge and experience as a gamer and researcher, the art of story, and use elements of academic and gay culture as interpretive frames. I live in a semi-closeted world of acceptance among those of my choosing. As a lesbian, I live my life crisscrossing margins in a world riddled with political heterosexism, a coercive world where I must live another's view of society. I cross borders between homo/hetero worlds; my visa is my ability to pass as straight. I live in and on margins at the intersections of multiple minority positioning: age, gender, sex, religion, multicultural, and multilingual. My story narrates portions of my life in an attempt to reach out to others while reflecting on my avatar experiences, inworld conversations with avatars and face-to-face gamer conversations.

I seek to achieve an understanding of my avatar place and my emotional response to marginalization. Reflecting on similarities and differences living as and in an avatar I use my approach as an orientation for avatar place-making that has potential of making life better for marginalized people. My journey through pain, confusion, anger, uncertainty, joy, happiness and freedom from harm is significant. What became clear to me as I moved through doctoral coursework was that, in my North American, hegemonic heterosexist physical world, research is plentiful about such topics as *otherness*—those who are marginalized by race, gender, sexuality or ability (Anzaldúa, 1999). I read and

critiqued research about gender, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ), race, ways of knowing, representation, colonialism and marginalization (Benhabib, 1992; Butler, 2011; Foucault, 1993; Martin, Gutman, 1988; Halperin & Traub, 2009; Minh-ha, 1991; Pillow, 2004; Spivak; 1988). The literature merged individuals into groups for the purpose of studying, what seemed to me, a homogenized cultural entity. Reflecting on my position in relation to the readings, I felt excluded.

I began my pilot study in Second Life. I needed to create my avatar-place as a way of ensuring researcher professionalism. I did not want to project or perform as anything other than a professional with a sole purpose, research. As the user-creator, I shared my researcher identity with my avatar then watched other avatars' reactions to her. At times, I had to revise her to enable us to sustain identifying relationships. Afterward, I realized that, as a researcher, I looked outward into a virtual world toward my avatar, through my avatar, and inward from my avatar. At times, I felt as if my avatar was the subject of my inquiry, at other times I wondered whether my physical world "I" was somehow the subject and my avatar the object I used to study myself. If my avatar was the object subject then so was her physical world counterpart, a cyborg me, a rendering combining my biology and technology (Haraway, 1991). When I reviewed my field notes and journaling I saw a connection to my online persona; I seemed present in the text.

This autoethnography offers one view, not many. This work is my reflection as one marginalized person on the construction of avatar as place, a place of freedom, experimentation, and learning.

* * *

Snow accumulates on tree branches making them look like those imitation flocked trees sold in grocery store lots. Another Christmas is here. Pressing issues crowd my thoughts forcing a disassociation from my surroundings. I stop thinking for a moment as I curl down in my favorite Adirondack chair. The snow on the patio looks like a windblown sandy beach with small peaks and valleys along the wind line. Across the way is a bar and dance club that may be a place to meet folks who might participate in our pilot. This place, a lesbian bar, is new to me. We have never been here. I look down at my shoes thinking I should put on more sturdy boots.

* * *

In SL, I stood on the margin of ethnography as one stands on a mountain top viewing both sides on a landscape, looking down and across rather than from the ground up. When I first designed my research avatar, I was very much the tinkerer. As much as I moved to display myself, my research avatar began to feel more like a mobile office, a bordered place I called RS rather than a representation of me. I would go there (into RS) to find information to take back to my physical world. My mobile office soon felt like a comfortable pair of shoes that I would wear to take me places in Second Life. I found myself adapting and changing RS, not, in the same way, I change shoes, rather, similar to the way I would go about changing the exterior of my house. RS is a place to live within a place, Second Life. As my work carried me into conversations with avatars, RS was a place I went to learn about us in our SL world.

RS is not a tool; she is not a thing I use, I live and learn in and through RS. With RS an intimacy exists—I feel her presence. I care for her; together, a joint agency drives our relationship. When I immerse myself in the SL environment, we fuse; I am empowered—as is she. It often feels as if she can anticipate my wishes. Players in interactive environments “engage in character attachments with their avatars much differently than in other character-driven forms of entertainment” (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008, p. 515). My pilot study started out as a small exploration of an idea. Yet, in exploring a sense of belonging in Second Life, developing field notes, journaling about avatar conversations, and fleshing out themes from data, I found deeply personal connections between my avatar and those with whom I spoke. This rich experience stayed with me, and I realized RS’s potential as a place for exploring sexual identity and living as and out adult. My personal experience as one marginalized and as a researcher in a mediated world focuses on one experience, one life (auto), to inform a broader understanding of avatars and potentially expand avatar customization and virtual world and game design (Ethno).

Why Second Life?

Second Life (SL) is a persistent simulated virtual environment consisting of a network of people represented by avatars. SL is considered a virtual world, online world or “synthetic world” (Castronova, 2007) rather than a game. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPG) and Role-playing Games (RPGs) are role-playing games designed for large numbers of players participating synchronously, asynchronously, in a range of online worlds. Members participate on teams or alone all of whom use avatars to represent players. All considered virtual worlds in one way or

another, but they are distinctly different. Second Life and similar virtual environments have broader, less restrictive player environments constructed primarily for social integration. They rarely contain one-person shooter, or competitive genres, though users can build them, or specific storylines, strategies, and competitive elements common in other virtual or game communities like the popular games Worlds of Warcraft (WoW) and Everquest (EQ). Players in these types of virtual environments and virtual worlds are at the core of successful virtual place designs.

Readers might question my choice of avatars in Second Life as a focus of research because some conceptualize SL as a static, even archaic, technology. To some, in fact, SL may be in decline because users have shifted to social networks like Facebook to play and perform. Certainly, Second Life new subscriptions and activity have waned since 2003 (Weinberger, 2015). However, while growth has slowed, 2015 figures show that there are still 900,000 active entrepreneurs per month taking roughly 60 million dollars in real world currency per year (Weinberger, 2015). In addition to continued memberships that number in the hundreds of thousands, SL expanded its employee base to over 200 employees and is looking toward a future of VR (virtual reality). As its latest capital venture, it plans to develop sites for use with Oculus Rift. SL differs from WoW and other types of competitive environments because players in SL do not have to play in groups or fill specific character requirements or compete.

I used to spend at least 10 hours per week playing WoW. I began playing in 2004. The cost of my first year was nearly six-hundred dollars because I purchased the software, hardware upgrades, and annual membership. Membership now costs roughly fifteen dollars per month with billing options monthly, quarterly or semi-annually. WoW

is an extremely popular MMORPG now appearing in schools. Educators are actively working to find ways to incorporate WoW into classroom work because learning through play is gained from active engagement with academic content; collaboration, problem solving, communication (written and verbal), and creativity through experimentation (McCrea, 2012; Schwartz, 2013). As stated earlier, SL is free but restricts membership to ages 16 years and older. Though SL is not suited for all youth and all learning spaces, virtual worlds similar to SL exist for younger players; Free Realms, Gaia Online, Club Penguin, and Whyville.

Lastly, I chose SL because of my own negative experiences in competitive game play surrounding my sexual orientation. SL offered me more freedom to explore my identity and less stress in trying to perform specific character requirements. In 2006, I was playing as a straight person in WoW privately but I was *out* to two of my guild members. At that time, playing as a straight person was my only option. The LGBTQ community was at odds when a LGBTQ guild began recruiting from within the game. The harassment was terrible. The company that developed WoW, Blizzard, banned gay friendly guilds. I kept up with the in-fighting for a while then quit. I closed my account and opened a new one in 2008. By 2014, LGBTQ friendly guilds and servers were cropping up. However, I still see gay bashing language from rival hordes and feel uncomfortable enough in those environments to stay closeted. Culturally, the time in WoW for me was a time of gay-bashing and exclusion. WoW as a technology exhibited attitudes that reflected heteronormative ideals (Hall, 1983).

Why Avatars?

In this same time frame, I was also in SL. SL LGBTQ forums and spaces feel safe. I chose SL as my focus. In SL I have two avatars. In them, I explore SL and myself while learning about my first life world through their SL virtual world. It was not until I developed my SL research avatar, my second SL avatar, and undertook a pilot study to explore avatar assembling, embodiment and a sense of belonging in SL that I realized her as a learning place. My avatar-place and those pilot study participants exposed the vulnerability and complexity of marginalized life in two worlds raising conceptual questions: Who were the humans behind these avatars? Why did they choose to enter SL? How did they perceive me? How did the human participants perceive and experience their avatars? How did their avatars act as places of learning for them, about their identity and fitting in the physical world? Did they gain strength from living a Second Life?

My avatar was my first contact as a person and as a non-person in conversation with another avatar. As I spoke through my avatar, human and non-human intertwined. I found my humanness played out on-and-in the screen through my avatar, rather than my avatar existing as an actor in a simulation. I think I exhibit my personality in a much better way when I am in my avatar than I do in my physical world. In my physical world, I tend to put on a toothy smile, go right up to someone give them a hearty handshake and introduce myself. My avatars sit quietly and watch without the nagging, burning need to open their mouths and speak. My avatars are places of refuge away from my busy, hectic, sometimes emotional or painful physical world. My avatars are places of respite, sources of solitude, joy, and sadness. Like many who feel marginalized, I do not have to constantly read the situation as in my physical world group social events or face-face first

meetings. My closeted life keeps me on guard when I am in public. To keep private, I move to control first meetings or certain social conversations. In SL, I do not have to make the preemptive move to be the friendly, funny person that seems necessary in my first world. I wonder how many youth and marginalized people have the opportunity to turn to avatars as their places of education or refuge. My adolescent years would have perhaps been less harrowing had the safe learning place of an avatar existed 50 years ago.

Bringing my Research into Focus

This type of research and personal writing is a call to disrupt and imagine another way of knowing about virtual world avatars beyond traditional research approaches. My hope is that I can instigate a dialogue or debate among educators, virtual environment designers and players about the affordances, norms, and heteronormative politics that inform virtual environment design and consider how such virtual environments may fit in the school curriculum. Avatar as place of education merits study for its educative meaning and value as self-education, self-creation, and self-knowledge possibilities for many people exploring aspects of their identity, but also for those feeling marginalized in society. I found through my experience and communication with other gamers' insights that highlight potential teacher gains (Gee, 2004; Klopfer, 2009; Richardson, 2012).

Exploring Relevant Scholarship

As part of my exploratory journey for this project, I have searched the literature seeking the experiences of others, garnering new knowledge, and confirming my own experience. Any journey has a starting point; many begin with a list of places to visit and are then mapped as routes to ensure arrival. For this journey through the literature, the list of places to visit was guided by the search terms affordance, constraints, conventions,

avatar development, Virtual World design, MMORPGs, and Human Computer Interaction (HCI). In combination, my list yielded more than 100 peer-reviewed publications that necessitated a visit. The routes chosen to map my visit to these articles included: Academic Search Premier, Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Digital Library, Computer Source, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Psychology/Behavioral abstracts, Science and Technology Collections, Social Science Abstracts, and Virtual World Journals. My circuitous route became a path littered with U turns, blocked streets requiring remapped routes, and unpaved side roads leading to new insights.

Here I meandered among multidisciplinary principles of Human Computer Interaction, psychology, social anthropology and gaming to consider the exploration of my avatar as place of education. I also reviewed work that is retrospective in nature—adults looking back on their lives. Then, I turned to one of the implications of this work, which was thinking through how avatar-as-place might be helpful for other marginalized groups, in particular, adolescents. A 20th-century notion of the World Wide Web as simply an information highway is obsolete. Evolving in the 1990s toward a society of social networking, 21st-century technology on the World Wide Web (Internet) unleashed an explosion, a big-bang of computer worlds and generated a meta-universe. Within it lie inhabited, interactive, three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds.

Schemata

Virtual world ethnographic and autoethnographic research on or about virtual worlds and avatars is well-represented in the literature (Boelstroff, 2008; Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009; Kennedy, 2009; Ogle, 2014). Two of the earliest computerized virtual

world ethnographies focused in virtual realms, which Turkle (1984, 1995) authored where she explored the early interaction between humans and their computers. A project initiated to explore how people interacted with a tool of learning and business revealed that human interaction with computers was much more: a human-computer relationship that became a “second self.” Turkle’s 1984 account of human-computer relationships, the first account of the potential of using virtual interaction for educative means, articulated human presence in computer environments as being in control of a computerized situation, yet having the potential to explore it creatively. As advances in technology expanded the boundaries and possibilities of computer use, ethnographic exploration of virtual worlds and the avatars inhabiting them have also grown. Numerous ethnographies within the virtual have explored virtual world construction (Malaby, 2011), culture (Boellstorff, 2008), community (Bakardjieva, 2003; Pearce, 2009), game culture (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006), identity (Paiva, 2014; Taylor, 2002; Waggoner, 2009), and avatar-self relationship (Schultze & Leahy, 2009).

Autoethnography roots extend back to early narrative work. During the past fifteen years autoethnography as a qualitative methodology, research using that methodology to explore virtual worlds and *self* (avatar) has increased. Autoethnographic literature in the field of avatar studies remains confined largely to dissertations exploring topics such as virtual world construction (Striker, 2012) and identity (Johnson, 2014; Liao, 2011; Wise, 2011), but have begun to appear in peer-reviewed and refereed journals (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2009; Liao, 2014).

Means

* * *

I am in my avatar place; I am not in a physical world place. I am in reality, a mediated reality. When discussing mediated reality, the literature likens the experience to one viewing film or television or from the standpoint of the effects of interacting and learning in a simulated environment.

* * *

Taylor's (2003) description of "intentional bodies" articulates the power of designers to create environments based on social assumptions on utopian ideals. In my game state, my ability to perceive myself through seeing my online identity is emotionally compelling. I am immersed in-the-picture. In speaking about Artemesia (co-author and avatar), Celia Pearce states, "you never know what will happen to you once you become an avatar" (Pearce, 2009, p. 215). Linden Lab's designers trouble normative thinking about cultural aspects of SL worlds through open coding (players can modify design codes). Conversely, Lindens articulate their social assumptions by limiting avatar customization. In Linden Labs, SL's open environment users create and upload their codes accommodating a broad range of inworld lifestyles. Avatars need only a few mouse clicks if they wish to experience gender/race/ability-swapping, age-changing, international politics, sexuality experimentation or even schizophrenia. Those who develop and envision the games are mostly white men who work within the powerful world of white male corporate America (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012; Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Taylor, 2002, 2004; Todd, 2012). Current global marketing research shows that gaming outside of the US is growing with a more

rapid growth in Asian countries and with Japan leading the way in social media (Dillon & Cohen, 2013; Nichols, 2013). Women in gaming development and production are changing the way games are created. Forbes (2014) noted the 10 most powerful women (Gaudiosi, 2014). Later in 2014 Forbes highlighted a special interest story about Sigurlina Ingvarsdottir, an industrial engineer who made her first entrance into the video game world working on Eve, who is now the senior producer at LucasArts working on the upcoming Star Wars Battlefront game (Morris, 2015). Electronic Arts, a Canadian company and one of the largest game production companies, recently hired Jade Raymond, ex-Ubisoft developer of Assassin's Creed, to oversee their Montreal studio (Morris, 2015). In spite of a few noted in-roads, women as developers and producers are in short supply, and women as players still fight misogyny to gain acceptance. Women gamers and developers are still enmeshed in the ongoing Twitter #gamergate, cyberbullying attacks (2014).

There are debates in current literature and over the past ten years in the realms of sexuality, education, technology, game and media studies that focus on whether social networking including virtual worlds disrupts or reinforces heteronormative binary thinking about gender politics. As a gamer and social network participant, I find that participants are more troubled by heteronormativity than are the paid developers. Autoethnographic research and writing work provides one avenue to disrupt thinking about physical world North American norms, capitalism, and heteronormative hegemonic politics. MMORPGs and virtual worlds are designed for specific purposes and with specific play outcomes and in-game customization. Players are at the mercy of those who design, determine design standards, marketing firms, and advertisers. (Castronova, 2005;

Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2014; Taylor, 2004; Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Merget, 2007).

Developers determine code and what modes of representation prevail in games. Game companies are for-profit enterprises; users gravitate toward games that pique their interests as game companies profit (Castronova, 2005). Gamers seek thrills or community, challenges or sex play, fun and fantasy (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Partala, 2011; Pullen & Cooper, 2010; Rizzo, 2006; Sangwan, 2005; Schultze & Leahy, 2009; Taylor, 2002; Taylor, 2004; Turkle, 1994, 2011; Whang & Chang, 2004; Yee, 2005, 2006b; Yee & Bailenson, 2007). In 2014, US video game software sold over 150 million units netting over six billion dollars (NPD Group, 2014). Profit margins are increasing too. In 2013, United States computer and video game hardware and software combined netted twenty-one billion dollars, revenue reached twenty-three billion in 2015 (Electronic Arts, 2016).

Online (Internet) research shows that meaningful experiences in online spaces can transfer to real world activities raising the question of how online environments can serve to empower marginalized youth (Cabiria, 2007). Online and Internet computer-generated environment participants interact in ways that both compare to, and differ from, their real world experiences. Gray (2009) has shown that online communication in online social spaces such as Facebook enables LGBTQ youth to build community across geographic distance. In any space:

“If learners in classrooms carry learning so far as to take on a projective identity, something magical happens, the learner comes to know that he or she has the capacity, at some level, to take on the virtual identity as a physical world identity” (Gee, 2007, p. 63).

Researchers have used an avatar as a concept and virtual world reality to theorize identity. Most notably, Gee (2007) posits a virtual world game player has a “tripartite identity” in the virtual world game: his/her physical world identity, his/her avatar identity, and his/her avatar’s “projective identity” operating in the virtual world game. Gee (2007) alludes to games as deep learning; “all deep learning—that is, active, critical learning—is inextricably caught up with identity in a variety of ways” (Gee, 2007, p. 54). For Gee, the tripartite nature of identity, in particular, places (What Gee terms ‘game space’) is “the key to deep learning, not just in online gaming but in online and offline spaces as well” (Gee, 2007, p. 54–55). Taylor (2006) expresses how her avatar both “supported and hindered her,” (Taylor, 2006; p. 12) recognizing the varied representations/meanings of her avatar persona in virtual environments. Taylor implies she projected psycho-social meaning-making via her physical world self in her virtual world avatar.

In her groundbreaking work on virtual identity, Turkle (1984) explored computers as extensions of self that move users to online spaces where they glimpse their physical world self. Current research extends Turkle’s theorizing to the areas of avatar persona development, avatar identity and identity transfer (Cabiria, 2007; Taylor, 2007; Yee, 2007; Yee & Bailenson, 2009). Investigations into virtual identity including studies on virtual world game players that show learning transfer exists between players’ virtual worlds and their physical worlds. Such learning illustrates that avatars have educative meaning and value. Avatar use differs among players. Avatars can function as mirror images of one’s perceived or desired self, scripted characters, invisible entities, 3D

cursors, objects of reflection, affection, and play; they are tools, repositories of capital, and autonomous agents (Shultz & Lehey, 2009).

Story of Avatar Development

A first step in living an online life requires the creation of an avatar. Avatar customization is a common feature in virtual 3D environments and varies depending on the environment interface. In other words, the avatar templates for characters are unique to each virtual 3D environment. The ability of player customization varies too. In games I play: Everquest (EQ), Worlds of Warcraft (WoW), and Second Life (SL), SL offers the most customizable, personal and environmental features. New members always have the option to take a stock avatar, also called an avi, and adapt it or create one of their own. SL and other games require binary-sexed bodies. Avatars have profiles that are either visible to all or in some games not visible to all. It is common to see an avatar walking about with their profile icon visible over their head or in a drop down choice menu depending on the member's selection of settings.

The specificity of avatar creation and customization helps establish a meaningful relationship between the user and their avatar. The avatar customization interfaces may differ in various environments but they all are problematic in how they constrain self-representation particularly in reference to gender. In many environments, only two options are available to players in choosing a human-like avatar style. In SL players must select either a male or female body type before proceeding. The male/female choice has specific body parts menus and slide controls for options to customize hair styles, color, eyebrows, and other corporeal body part features. The slide-controlled settings move along gradations from left to right, with a midpoint I take to mean average. Second Life

(SL) avatar interfaces offers avatar design affordances to users that may seem like unlimited possibilities but in reality, may not meet the need of the user.

* * *

I move the slide; my features change eye shape and color, hair style and color, neck size, and even height and weight. Several hours pass. I try on hair, change my eyes, arms, trunk, feet, legs, and skin. One last change, redder, less curl, maybe up off my neck and longer in the front. I am ready to begin my pilot study interviews, the female I am meeting at the coffee shop is my participant and I do not want to look phony or trite. Until now, we've only communicated through IM's, never face-to-face. I feel trepidation and maybe a bit false. Is this the *me* I want to project? I certainly do not look like my first life mirror image, though I do look this way in my mind's eye. For now, I use what the game designers afford me. RS is ready to leave the apartment. I feel a slight, emotional anticipation of meeting potential participant Kay for the first time face-to-face. I hope I look *good* in a butch way. RS steps outside; the day is sunny and looks warm. I lightly touch my mouse, RS moves forward. Rather than a smooth gate, RS jolts then trips over the patio curb. We (RS and I) are embarrassed by my ineptness. We quickly jump to our feet in an attempt to regain our composure, only to fall down the stairs, again. I feel frustration. I attempt to move RS a third time. This time, my mouse actions cause RS to leap into the air almost as high as the apartment roof. She lands on both feet, knees flexing as she lands. We stand there momentarily glancing around. RS looks as if she is taking on my

embarrassment, hoping as I do no bystanders or passersby saw the spectacle. We pause to regain composure then slowly begin walking in stop/start serpentine patterns. SL offers practice venues for users. I decide to teleport to one of them, the Sandbox, before teleporting to the coffee shop for my meeting with Kay.

In the Sandbox, I think to myself that the female avatar picked from Linden's free-of-charge stock collection seems to work for me but she needs customization. I do not think about design conventions (female/woman) only about myself as a researcher. I change my body, adding two inches to my height, modify my hips and breasts, then my hair color and length. I like the modified me, in my mind, she meets my ideal of a researcher. After some practice with gestures and action movements, I take a final look. Using my mouse to change camera angles, I quickly gaze at her one last time; I am pleased. In this new avatar creation of me, this customized body I will meet new people for the first time on a different plane of existence, in another dimension. I have no idea that I look much different from other Second Life residents or I will stand out in some way, after all; my choices are Linden-approved. While I am walking in Second Life, another avatar lets me know I look like a newbie. Feeling embarrassed and out-of-place, I teleport home. I want to rethink RS. I've grown to like her.

* * *

The experience and thoughts of changing or deleting her to *fit-in* were painful. In my first life and for as long as I can remember I have had to change myself time and

again to pass or fit in. The difference in Second Life is that the chiding is in fun. I do not feel threatened or bullied. My first life, colored by Second Life, leaves me feeling vulnerable for a moment. I need to reteach myself that in Second Life folks are often simply fun and friendly, most really don't care about my first life demons. I decide to teleport to my meeting with Kay.

* * *

My teleport landing plops me down in the middle of the street. I quickly leap to my feet gazing around to see if there are bystanders who witnessed my less-than-perfect landing. I gaze up the hill lined on one side with shops and single family dwellings all facing a large body of water. The coffee shop is nestled on a well-landscaped lot half way up the hill. As I draw closer to the entrance path, I see a patio overlooking a harbor filled with sailboats and motor-powered yachts. Kay, already seated, waves at me to join her. We chat about my newbie experience and the limited choices of body styles. In Kay's opinion, I stand out because everyone can spot what she calls the Linden look; stock body, limited design elements in hair and body parts selection. I feel concern but take comfort knowing that my *look* passes as female. I did not want to come across as male. We visit briefly before our session. I am anxious because this is my first official pilot study interview. I have prepared for this interview and today I am an ethnographer! I begin the interview with what I thought were well-crafted interview questions only to find myself asking clarifying questions. Kay freely answers all my questions during our session.

During one of my clarifying follow-up questions, Kay reveals she is in transition from male to female in her first life. After our session, Kay mentions that it is easy to pick out females in SL who had male counterparts on the other side of the screen because they all had idealized feminine bodies, fixed avatar bodies that were consistent with commercially-accepted views of the perfect female form. When I asked her to explain further, she told me that only a man would design a woman to look like that! I realized deeper meanings exist at the heart of game design code. Designers imposed limitations on my identity. These limitations (design constraints) on my avatar interface meant my avatar body was controlled by another's perceptions and social assumptions about my gender identity and sexuality.

* * *

Kay found congruence with her avatar—something as a transitioning female (male to female) her first life does not offer her. Kay's transitioning to living as female is occurring in her physical world. Presently, her physical body is more male than female. She is taking female hormones, has grown her hair and began surgeries. She had neck remodeling within the past year and anticipates breast surgery in the upcoming months. As Kay expresses, *bottom surgery* is costly and is years away at this time. She expressed that she faces immediate social repercussions at times from people when she dresses in female clothing and makeup.

SL is a safer place than many physical world settings to experiment with identity. Kay is comfortable with her SL body choices. My needs differ. However endless female body choices may seem, design constraints prevent me from making the female me or

researcher female me I wish to see on the screen. I feel frustrated that I have to settle for what is offered to me but take solace in knowing that my avatars are places that offer safe experimentation in them, I learn about myself not otherwise offered in my first life.

Tutorial: SL and Avatar Design

All life's experiences have educative value. Through experimentation I learned hard lessons about how to negotiate living in my world. In corporeal world settings experimentation outside social norms often leads to ridicule, rebuke, and in its worst form, abuse (Cabiria, 2008; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Gregg, Chang, & Todd, 2012; Interactive, Gay, & Network, 2005; McGonigal, 2011; Sharpe & Gorman-Murray, 2013; Stotzer, 2009; Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012). When I experimented in my first life with trying new activities or trying out new identities, I often met with disapproval and punishment from the adults and powerful social institutions that shaped my daily life; school, church, public policy. My actions proved detrimental to me too, through drugs, promiscuity, at risk behaviors and thoughts of suicide. In avatar places, experimentation is accompanied by suggestions, tolerance, or at worst, gentle chiding or critique.

Humans design games some of whom use game analytics as design guides. The very nature of virtual world design infrastructures are built around discursive practices, "cultural rhetoric" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) rather than around the needs of players (Antonenko, Dawson & Shilpa, N.D.). Nakamura (2002) suggests that interfaces present a hegemonic view of design creating menu-driven identities. In WoW, for instance, power relations in the game and among avatars are defined by the user's choice of avatar and faction or team within guilds. I might choose to join one of two factions with races

affording avatars different powers. Alliance—the Alliance consists of 5 races: the noble humans, the adventurous dwarves, the enigmatic night Elves, the ingenious gnomes, and the honorable. In WoW, I am a Turan in the faction Horde. In SL, an association with groups is not required. Second Life, as game title and space implies users can live away from one's corporeal first-life. SL designers hands-off approach to user space creations escapes the popular shooter and quest design models making SL more liberating. I can meet people just like me, gay, afraid, living in fear of being *outed*. I can explore living freely *out* as gay without fear and meet others on their terms. Gender specific requirements imposed by SL reinforce prevalent patriarchal heteronormative values, banal notions about bodies and increased commodification of the game space. Despite all of the choices, and flexibility, and decorations in one's avatar, it is a place of education about the self, and it is a place of education about cultural norms and one cannot escape from having to choose, at some level, from within limited genders.

SL's design follows gendered design conventions. I play in virtual worlds and MMORPGs. In one particular game, I am a bovine like humanoid who walks upright on crouched hind feet, has mandatory breasts, and wears pink crisscross war-and-tactical-iron-bra-type armor, accessorized with a bullet laden bandolier. I must choose a basic female body type, one which is unalterable. I can reduce my avatar's breast size but not become totally flat chested. I save each customization in my personal inventory. For my avi to gain access to female only venues in SL, I need a female body. I created my research avatar from generic male and female templates. However, having a male body prevents my avatar from entering all female venues. I envisioned my research avatar to look like a younger version of myself, back when I was a college athlete, small breasted,

strong, muscular, and tanned. I never thought of myself as having male features or body type then or now. Creation of my ideal body required I purchase *skins* to wear over my stock female body. Male skins permitted me to look more as I saw my avatar-self yet maintain female gender. SL's body design inventory has a vast menu of choices for those who ascribe to a binary-sexed world. Whether players just like me want female bodies that have features reserved for male avatars or players who do not subscribe to a two-sex system, or varied gender expressions, who envision a different place in SL to escape, experiment or live away from the first life heteronormative binary system that controls us, nowadays, SL users design and can upload alternative designs for all features of their avatar. Users can save and execute non-SL affordances to a personal file for use with SL items or more public commercial endeavors.

Early residents in SL were restricted to Linden architecture and designer visions of skins, limiting user possibilities of the skins they could use to create their perfect avatar. Gradually, resident ingenuity led to the creation of particular skin textures for avatars ranging from realistic skin and hair to fantasy-inspired scales or feathers. Skins could be sold in Linden dollars or traded to other residents. Once residents customize their avatars by creating their skins and clothes in a separate graphics program, as a standard practice, they can import those files into their SL inventory. Although I was not aware of this possibility in my previous time as a gamer, I learned this transformative technique during my research, and it became pivotal in a redesign of my avatar. SL entrepreneurialism is fueled by a vibrant consumerism. It is not unusual for players to receive free items (coffee, T-shirts, toys or coupons) for items through inworld IMs (instant messages). I purchased enhancements with Linden dollars. My body skin cost

250 Linden dollars (equal to \$1.00 US) to cover my female body (<http://secondlife.com/>; 2014). I changed, adapted, and made her special. She went from being a tool to help complete my research to a place of comfort, a place where I learned more about myself. In contrast, creating RS was a struggle. I wanted to shape the technology rather than allow the technology to shape me. I wanted her to be *just right*, just like me, but the question was *which* me; a mirror of the real, a projection of an internalized vision, a combination; the student, the older, the younger, the smart looking? I settled on a younger version of how I perceive myself now. I figured that she was about honesty and integrity rather than campy or masquerade. In 2013, Linden's 5-year net worth averaged 75 million dollars mostly from their land rentals and advertisers who use their site. SL is free to join and play for those who simply want a social place to go. Resident entrepreneurs helped create a dynamic economy in SL producing and selling goods and services to other residents. Linden promotes a laissez-faire approach to the endeavor by maintaining a site, "The Market Place" dedicated to resident shopping. S.L. Residents can earn livings supplying goods and services to other residents too.

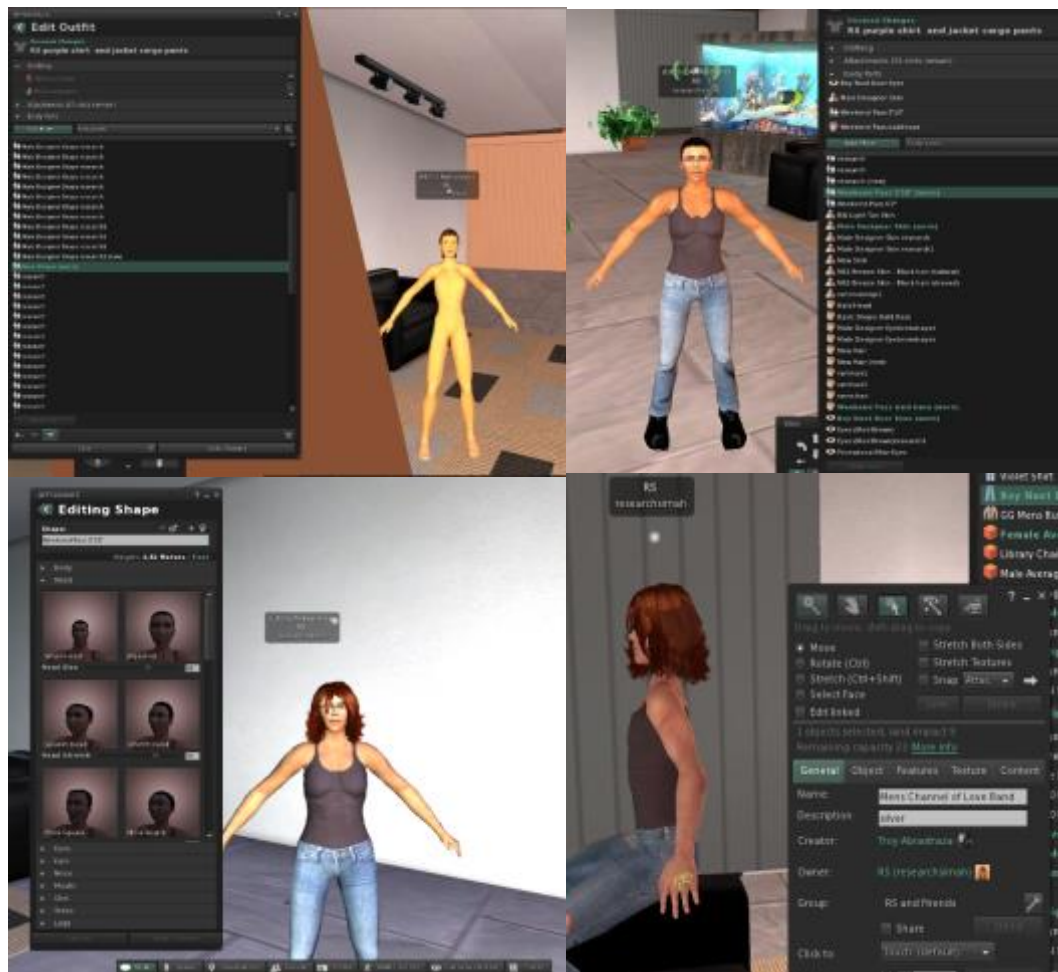


Figure 4. Body customization in Second Life

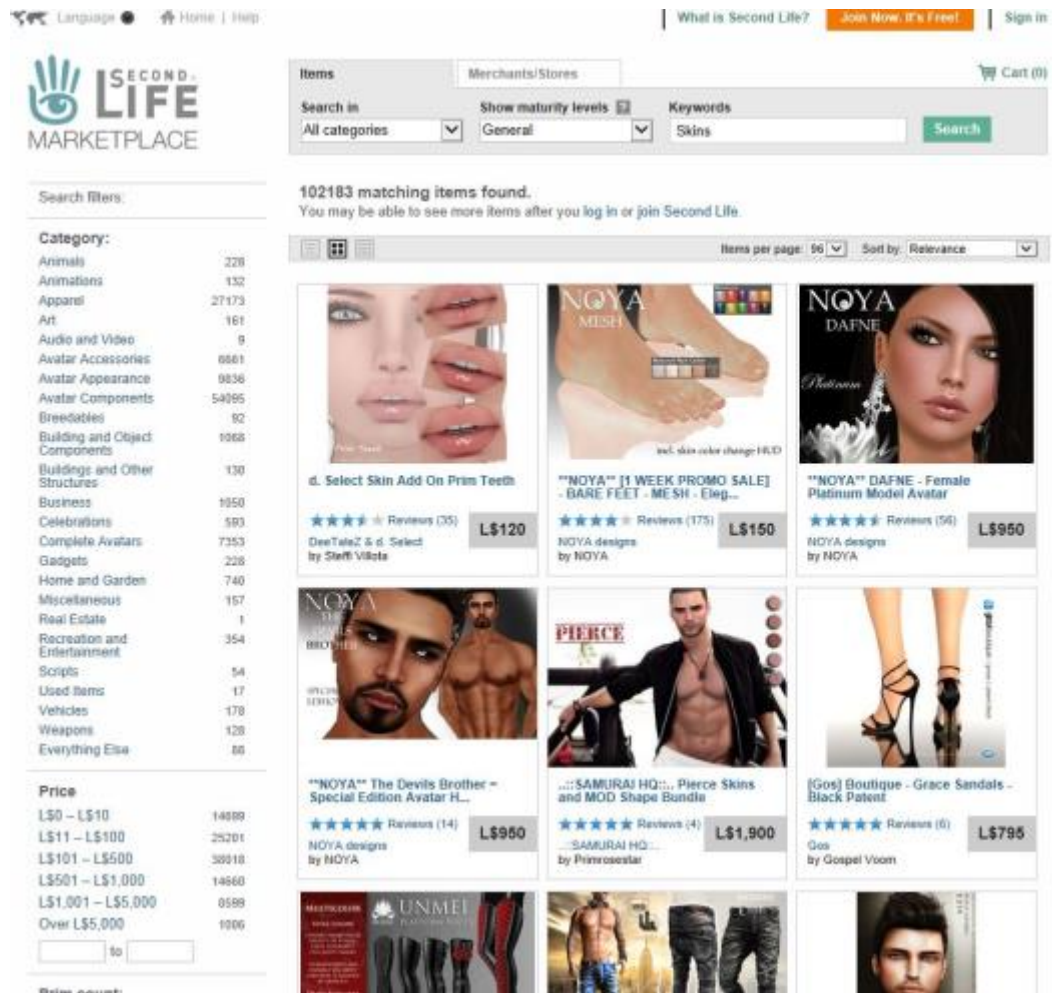


Figure 5. Second Life Marketplace

As discussed earlier, entrepreneurial spirit fueled by consumerism is well established in SL. Residents choosing to purchase items can maintain a personal inventory of purchased body enhancements, such as fuller lips, hair style, and length, body skin, or muscular development. Once purchased, the items are placed in a player's personal inventory much like one's first life closet. Avatars can change their clothing and body styles using the right mouse button to wear or remove and add or delete any item in their inventory. My friend Kay chose a female body in order to meet other females in female-only venues. Her first life male body makes her feels out of place in first life. Living as female in SL she did not need a skin; she simply chose a gender female avatar.

A quick Google search typing “first life money making in Second Life” yielded scores of how-to books and articles in print and online offering advice to those considering entrepreneurial endeavors. SL offers players opportunities to share or charge real money for designs, and some supplement first life income with money earned from their work in SL (Boellstorff, 2008b). It is thus possible for first world individuals to open a profitable Second Life business in body design, clothing, or accessory design and make first world profit. SL residents purchase and exchange Linden dollars, for a nominal fee, with first world cash. SL has commercial rents on plots of land, special use areas for stores, shops, and mall areas. SL is static. In 2016, Linden, in regard to virtual world longevity, is ancient. SL recently celebrated its twelfth year anniversary. Linden’s latest Project Sansar will move Linden Labs into a virtual reality platform.

Relocating My Avatar Researcher: Ethnographer to Autoethnographer

During my final year of doctoral coursework, I conducted a virtual world ethnographic pilot study for the current project focusing on avatars’ sense of belonging. The pilot study *Exploring the sense of belonging in “Second Life”* (Handwerk, 2012) explored adult participants’ experiences having (avatars) meaningful relationship(s) in Second Life communities. My initial interest was in the physical/virtual world convergence. I sought to investigate how participants experiencing social and academic marginalization effects in their physical worlds interacted in virtual world communities and if their online experiences carried over into their day-to-day physical world. I developed tools to integrate first life ethnography into virtual world research submitting several proposals to the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). My advisor and I revised our IRB numerous times attempting to answer IRB concerns. Frustrated and

unable to explain my work to our IRB, I contacted Tom Bollestroff for assistance in writing an IRB for online research. Tom Boellstorff is Professor of Anthropology at University of California-Irvine School of Social Sciences and a renowned real and virtual world scholar/ethnographer/author. He based his books *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2007) and *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2009) on his experiences as a researcher in Second Life. Tom graciously suggested enhancements and background information that I used to help the IRB understand my work.

For my pilot study exploring belonging in SL, I sought volunteers (avatars) who felt they are or have had experienced damaging social and academic effects in physical world environments (i.e. marginalization due to race, sexual orientation, learning disabilities, handicapping conditions, and social disorders). In interviews with the avatar-participants, I asked if and or how they use their online sense of belonging to navigate physical world environments. I chose avatars constructed by self-identified females purporting to be marginalized in their physical world environment. My method was ethnography facilitated by technology as my design. I positioned myself as a virtual ethnographer working through my research avatar to study participants in one virtual world. Ethnography offered me old familiar and newer novel ways of seeing culture in which I was living. In my pilot study, I moved past traditional qualitative traditions and settings (physical world cultures). I followed other published online ethnographic frameworks designed for virtual worlds or online games. I chose my form from frameworks used by those who have firsthand experience in both worlds (Boellstorff, 2008a; Malaby, 2011; McCue, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Peachey & Childs, 2011; Pearce, 2006; Taylor, 2002; Turkle, 2011; Yee, 2006b; Yee et al., 2007). In my researcher role, I

experimented with the methodological complexity of doing virtual research and viewed my position in relationship to my study participants. My similar experiences to my participants raised self-doubt about continuing ethnography beyond my pilot study. I was unable to compartmentalize. I could not separate my painful experiences from those of my participants. My role moved from the researcher, as one looking in culture toward a role of researcher and participant in culture.

An ethnographer is a bricoleur or a tinkerer, creating patchwork images about what their data represents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Ethnographers research culture. They make meaning through description, analysis and interpretation of data (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2005, 2011; C. S. Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Patton, 2002; Wolcott, 2008). Living a lesbian life automatically classifies me as a member of a researched group, LGBTQ. Reading research about LGBTQ Culture sometimes left me feeling that my identity was homogenized into a symbolic Other, a group of those *not us* by the very people researching my culture. My history underpins my place in the world, one where many marginalized identities intersect: woman, lesbian, aged, not Oklahoman but from somewhere else, and raised in a family of mixed cultures. In the larger global LGBTQ culture, the only common thread among us is the fact that we all deviate from a heterosexual norm. The very notion of researching one mixture of players, LGBTQ, or any symbolic anachronism *young, old, man, woman* astounds in its arrogance that all *experience a sameness*. Because of my experiences and the importance of avatars to my evolving identity, I chose to focus on similarities and differences in my journey to add an additional layer of potential understanding about sexual diversity, avatars, virtual world design, and learning.

Autoethnography emerged as my research tool shortly after discussing my dissertation proposal with my committee. I shared personal experiences describing how I was influenced by my avatars in online gameplay. Committee member feedback contained such words as autobiography, narrative, and storytelling. Once I understood, autoethnography seemed a logical choice. Ellis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) describes autoethnography as an autobiographical genre that displays “multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (quoted in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; p. 739). I drafted my first memo. I felt vulnerable turning the focus from a broad cultural lens looking outward to a lens focusing inward on myself.

Places of Education: Backyards, Bulletin Boards, and Beyond

During my pre-teen years, my parent’s room was off-limits to us unless an adult accompanied us. Through the open door, we could see the old cedar chest at the foot of my parent’s bed. Occasionally, Mom or Dad would open it to put something in or take something out. It had smooth well-oiled pinkish and brown woods that gave off a Christmas tree scent. In it were treasures! My dad had been a merchant marine before he married my mother and it was a place of imagination for me; yellowing white sailor hats, a shark jaw, a bag of shark teeth, a sawfish bill, and an assorted stash of Merchant Marine memorabilia. To me, that cedar chest seemed more like pirate’s loot. Dad gave me and my cousin each a sailor’s hat from his coveted collection. He told us sea stories as he carefully showed us how to “trim the brim” of the hat by molding the top edges with our hands. Dad wore his sailor hat in a square slightly to one side; we wore ours with the brims down making them look like helmets.

It is a typical warm summer morning. At seven years of age, my mother braids my hair, fixes breakfast, and my father suggests I go out and play. I grab my sailor's hat hurriedly, put it on and head out the door. I walk down the hall to the stairwell jumping from one dark square tile to a light square tile trying to avoid stepping on any cracks. At the fourth floor landing, I grasp the smooth dark omega-shaped wooden railing atop ornate handcrafted wrought iron scrolled panels meshing between the twisted iron balusters to the bottom rails. The stairwell's long frosted glass panels brightly lit my way. I continue my hopping from one landing to the next, step-to-step counting to each step 1, 2, 3...14, 15, 16. When I reach the landing, my heart is pounding. I rest, taking a breather before continuing the trek down. I reach the third floor landing letting loose of the stair rail, then quickly grasping the landing rail, I hop around the left to the next staircase. I hear my breathing and beating heart then the slapping whooshing sound my leather soled shoes make as they land, then slide, on the stair treads.

At the second floor landing, I leave the stairwell. I am out of breath and panting from hopping down 96 steps. The stairwells and hallways have incandescent lighting that comes on after dark and remains on until daylight. The halls have no direct daylight making them darker than the stairwells. I take one last breather pausing momentarily for my eyes to readjust to the darkness before walking the dark hallway leading to my cousin's apartment. The apartment coal-fired furnace fills the air with the heavy stench of coal tar. My deep breaths draw the odorous air across my tongue—I taste it too. I skip past the dumb-waiter on the way to my cousin's apartment. No one is looking; I take a short run then lean forward. With my knees slightly bent my arms spread sideways for balance I skate the last several feet sliding to his door (a taboo when adults are present).

My aunt opens the door dressed in her house dress and apron. She puts her finger to her lips motioning me to be quiet because the baby is sleeping. She tells me that my uncle is sleeping too because he worked the night shift. I wait for my cousin at the far side of the living room sitting on the cold radiator in front of the double windows leading to what we called our patio, the fire escape. The fire escape is wide enough for two adults and long enough for the double windows, it makes a railed patio of sorts. We often sat out there or played board games out there in the summer. It was also a place where my aunt kept injured birds while they healed. My cousin and I would hunt around for birds that hit the buildings during flight or fell from nests built on the eaves, catch them with our hands then haul them up two flights of stairs to my aunt for fixing.

My cousin grabs his sailor's hat as we go outside for one of our usual urban adventures. We live in a blue collar mixed housing area. For several blocks around there are a series of 16 family apartments amid smaller well-kept single family dwellings. We have trees to climb, an old out of service trolley track spans miles between towns. Over the years, soil accumulated over the tracks in places and trees along the sides formed what looked like a tunnel. We can travel for miles along the tracks without ever getting lost. Our yard around the apartment complex has several large parking lots and my school's playground is nearby, always at my disposal. I live three blocks away from the Hudson River Palisades, a 300+ foot expanse of rugged, bare basalt with straight drops to the riverbank. It is a place where after rain, cuts in the rock form waterfalls and babbling brooks. Our imagination makes us explorers in dense forests seeking adventure. This place is strictly off-limits. Our hats empower us—in them we are infallible, and we take the risk of a spanking if our parents find out.

Our interest wanes after a few hours, and we decide to head home to see if our uncle is awake. He is a Russian immigrant and often spins tales of wonderment about his childhood. However, this day is special. This day my uncle meets us, his arms full of wooden materials. He tells us an adventure story as he fashions swords from fence pickets and shields from peach crate tops. Today, we are in the age of Camelot.

As early as I can remember, I was a fan of Tolkien's legendary mythological place, *Middle-earth* (Tolkien, 1937). We made up adventures as Knights of the Round Table¹ or Hobbits (Tolkien, 1937) weaving tales, imaged in snowcapped mountains and deep dark forests battling evil. I do not remember how or who decided *the quest of the day* but somehow we would have a goal. As the U.S. space program developed during the 1950s, we added space adventures to our repertoire of quest games, killing monsters, and aliens. Saving the queen or the planet kept me busy until my dad bought a home in another town and I lost my quest mate. How and what I played as a child drew me to video games, and then later, MMORPGs, and Second Life. Everquest's Norath (EQ's most popular world), piqued my interest early on. I dabbled for a short time in Ultima's main series in the 1980s The Age of Darkness, The Age of Enlightenment, and The Age of Armageddon, then to the Dark Age of Camelot, and Worlds of Warcraft keeping the world of Azertoth (and the kingdom) safe.

Virtual worlds offer players a place where they explore, build things, problem solve and engage in community. Emerging research (Cabiria, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Yee, 2005; Yee & Bailenson, 2007) demonstrate that online spaces offer players a

¹ Characters in Arthurian legends surrounding the fictional place, Camelot.

place to live, grow, develop, and where attributes learn online transfer to real world situations. MMORPG play is limited to clubs and after school venues; it is not part of everyday K-12 school participation. Research on MMORPGs and virtual worlds is an emergent field. A small number of researchers compliment qualitative research with groundbreaking ethnographic, anthropological, autoethnographic and theoretical work in Second Life (Boelstroff, 2008b), Worlds of Warcraft (Nardi, 2010) Everquest (Pearce, 2009) and Whizzimo (Antonenko, Dawson, & Shilpa, 2015). Their work studies problem solving, community, presence, player needs, and transference.

Computer-mediated cognition playgrounds such as virtual worlds are sites where players take part in challenges, participate in quests, build worlds, collaborate, and form communities. Virtual world co-creative games (WoW, EQ, and SL) are informal learning spaces requiring human/computer interaction including cognitive skills and strategies used in everyday life. Collecting game artifacts, making points and leveling, sense community and belonging derive from communities of practice, social apprentice programs where players learn from within specialized groups (Nardi, 1996a; Pearce, 2009; Wenger, 1998). Games frequently offer cheat sheets or written rules; however, players most often rely on other players with experience to learn game rules and strategies.

Research on and in virtual worlds and MMORPGs suggests users go for fun, challenges, and interaction with others in anonymous, safe ways (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2004). Many also seek emotional support, a sense of belonging and encouragement (Evans, 2011). By design, Interactive virtual worlds open creative pathways for individuals to explore relationships with others through computer games which may

influence their sense of self (Bakardjieva, 2003; Barnes & Pressey, 2012). A creative design motivates virtual world participants to join groups with the intent of building social relationships (Spencer & Patrick, 2009; Taylor, 2004).

Early in my career, during the 1970s, I accepted a contracted teaching position in a K-12 school on a Native American Reservation in a tribal community on tribal land. The majority of us (teaching staff) were young, bright-eyed, eager, and Caucasian. Many of us had been teaching for fewer than five years, came from diverse backgrounds, and converged from distant parts of the country. Within two years of accepting my position, State standards considered our District successful. This *success* translated to the lowest rate of student suicide (25%) and the highest attendance rate for the schools of our size. Looking at the numbers, during my fifth and final year at the school, our school of 99 children across grades K-12, buried 17 school-age friends and family—eight alone in one month. As their teacher and member of the Reservation Catholic Church circuit, comprised of three small congregations all within a 35-mile radius, I knew all of them by name.

I had been teaching in-State at another school as was the District Superintendent. When he left his position, he asked if I'd join him on his *dream team*; a group of teachers and administrators he hand-picked to staff a new school 50 miles away. Our surroundings were a teacher's dream; a brand new school with state of the art accoutrements conducive to learning, and an expert team of teachers and staff. Schools in our area were as equipped—so what was different about our school? Our school had a visionary, forward thinking administrative team. We were located in an economically depressed area supported by government programs that included food, medical, educational, and local

infrastructure. Our Superintendent challenged our faculty with developing a totally hands-on curriculum: our team's goal was to achieve a student-centered school. We would change space into places (Agnew, 1987; Bishop, 2008; Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 1977) where students would come to participate in directed and self-directed learning.

All of the staff assisted each other with individual programs. Our home economics courses taught students to cook meals using commodity foods. The room was directly opposite one of the gym doors. During basketball games and other school-sponsored activities the home economics students would pull a table in front of their door and offer concessions of home-cooked fast foods from menus and recipes the students created. Shop courses offered hands-on work rebuilding students' family cars and farm equipment, and various metallurgical students designed art projects. Language arts and Title III folks had students writing plays; artistic faculty worked with math and shop designing scenery; the elementary school next door helped with painting and posters.

I was given the responsibility of building the first track and field program as the physical education teacher. I was also teaching Math and Science at the time. So I built the track with my classes using the experience as a math and science practicum. I enlisted the help of our vocational-agricultural teacher and with our combined classes we were able to complete the track and field areas complete with turf and benches. My background in music, semi-professional photography, and my bus driver's license added to my workload. I incorporated the out-of-doors and local field trips into my curriculum design. I'd pile students, sample boxes, science equipment, and cameras into the bus and we'd head over to the Badlands across the river.

The success of our program depended on students coming to school and participating in learning projects. Attendance was sporadic. The school employed a truancy officer that visited student homes. Government checks shortened students' rates of consecutive absence because family assistance programs required they maintain a certain rate of attendance as well as a restricted number of consecutive days absent. Teachers named it *the nine day rule*. There seemed to be enough projects that every student was able to find a place but, I often wondered, how were we going to get the students to school?

An idea to address the attendance issue emerged during a staff meeting. There was a music classroom that was not in use at the time. We decided to make it a student lounge, filling it with bean bag chairs, sofa, foosball, board games, stereo and several arcade-type video game consoles. At this point in time, Jobs and Wozniack, inventors of Apple computers, were still working from a garage; PC's were still a dream. The games were the arcade style that one sees in old movies. I'm not sure who manufactured them or what games we had at the time. I do know that there always seemed to be groups of students around the consoles offering solutions to problems, helping with strategies, interacting in ways not seen in classwork activities. The students who participated in the game room activities seemed to handle day-to-day frustration better than students who did not participate. Maybe they felt empowered or in control: maybe the game room offered a safe venue to be their age untethered by the burdens of their outside world. The student lounge had restrictions: attendances, grade point, and other behavioral rules. Among all of the changes, the game room seemed to inspire the most positive change in the students that I observed. What was it about the games? Was it the immersion, the

problem solving, the feeling of freedom, agency, identity? These are the questions I return to when thinking about gaming. I played arcade games as a child and adult. When PC games came on the landscape, I participated in them too. Computer gaming is my passion.

Playing games led me to online bulletin boards, and then chatrooms where I spent hours socializing with players. At work, my company participated in the first Token Ring (local area network) around the St. Louis area. I had my first electronic mail (email) during the 1980s. During that time, I installed a telephone modem on my home computer and opened an America Online (AOL) account. AOL eventually offered users chatrooms. It was on AOL that I met online individuals who shared similar interests. AOL was a one stop shop, offering email, shopping, news, and help with homework, a teacher information network, and all for \$19.95 per month. AOL's message boards and chat rooms were all the rage. One simply signed-up AOL for a fee, received an email account, adopted a screen name, and chose a picture icon. I considered myself a heavy-user since I visited several hours per day. I played one of their early dungeon games noted as one of the first MMORPs with graphics, *Neverwinter Nights*, browsed AOL's chat rooms, and searched for my interests using keyword search criteria. The old AOL used a semi-Boolean syntax. I could search dating sites with labels like female-looking-for-female, finding specific descriptors and communities such as "diesel-dykes" and "motorcycle mamas." Anyone could set up a chat room. Participating in chat rooms allowed me to open the closet door and experience community: I sensed a bond with these faceless, bodiless icons that boasted a screen name. Who were the women behind these masks? I did not care. I was connected to something tangible, bigger than me, some like me and

some very different, all presenting themselves online as a lesbian. In looking back, perhaps the initial draw for me to online worlds and games was the anonymity coupled with a sense of community. Rich social interaction is salient; screen names appear as typing scrolls across the screen in ubiquitous conversations. I felt part of a strong, solid, supportive group of people to whom I related. AOL was freeing, it gave voice to this closeted Lesbian forced into silence by Power and kept in silence by fear.

I do not recall knowing about any AOL incidents of cyber-hacking. I do not know if it existed on AOL. I was aware of Internet protocol (IP) addresses and understood the ramifications of using my company computer to surf the web. The company information technology (IT) department had not restricted company use of technology. Occasionally a message would show up in my company email reminding us of company policy. At home, a post would come across now and then that warned about intrusions or email bombs. I continued participating without regard. My experiences with AOL throughout the 1980s and 1990s would not move me out of my closet, but it did manage to open the door. What AOL offered at the time were safe places for people to socialize online in anonymity. Would this type of social sharing with other LGBTQ persons help youth who otherwise are forced into silence? I decided to visit a teen questioning site to discover what technologies and virtual spaces were available for teens. Knowing that LGBTQ youth had higher suicide rates than their straight peers concerned me. Given that few safe zones were available to LGBTQ youth, I wondered whether safe online communities might aid in self-understanding. Would this platform extend to others?

Growing Up Different: Odd Girl In and Out

I did not wake up one day and announce to myself I was lesbian. The realization of my same sex orientation took a meandering path through coming to terms with myself. The process was a gradual unfolding as is the blooming then blossoming from youth to adulthood. At seven, I knew I was different from my younger sister and her friends, girls in my school classroom, scouts, or neighborhood acquaintances. I felt more bored with the *girl* games and activities than I did getting dirty playing with the neighborhood boys. I was more of a tomboy, finding enjoyment in running, biking, roller skating, and stick ball games I shared with boys. Sitting still or playing house, dolls, and happy homemaker was of little interest. My mother used to call me a “holy terror,” and my dad, “apple head” because I was most often seen with braids flopping and bouncing off my shoulders, stray hairs glued to my face from sweat, my cheeks flushed, and half out of breath as I would run to greet them. Fitting in with the other girls was never important until the adults in my world judged it so.

By the time I was in high school, I had moved beyond thinking about sex with girls to an intimate and monogamous relationship with my first girlfriend. She was friends with a gay boy and his partner. We decided to hide our sexuality by cross-dating. She dated the more masculine male partner, and I dated the more docile fellow. She lived near the high school, the four of us would meet at her house regularly. Her dad and stepmother knew and didn’t try to stop us from dating each other. This relationship continued for almost two years, through our sophomore year of high school. Her parents divorced, causing her to move to the other side of town. Our dating rituals changed too. The fellow I dated left to attend another school and his partner, though still in school,

went his separate way. It was just her and me again. She used to live in a high-rise overlooking Manhattan when we first dated. The divorce forced her dad to downsize. Their apartment was in a less expensive area of town with four-story walkups. The view was of other apartment buildings. Forgetting about the possibility of voyeurs, we forgot to close the blinds. One day a fellow band member saw us through a window, and my *secret* was exposed. My new name was “les be friends.” My partner attempted suicide.

During her hospitalization and after one of my usual hazings, I chased a band member in the hall outside the band room who had been taunting me. I caught up with her, grabbing and lifting her up by the throat, then slamming her against the lockers. I let her go and walked away. I was angry and filled with hate and felt if I did not walk away right then, I would kill her. I was called out of my next class and told to report to the office. When I entered the main office, I was ushered into the school psychologist’s office. The principal, assistant principal and counselor asked me to explain my outburst. I told the principal if I had wanted to kill her I could have, I simply wanted her to stop mocking me. I am sure school officials knew what had happened to my friend and perhaps felt in-school suspension rather than out-of-school suspension would suffice. Maybe the school official who was a classmate of my mother’s thought it best to handle the situation in school. In any case, I thought I’d escape home discipline, but my sister heard my name over the loud speaker and told my parents at the dinner table. The fallout was deafening. During the spring holiday break, I was sent to my Aunt’s house. My mother explained it to me as a time to let things in my house cool down. I quickly came to understand how the rest of my life must be lived: in the closet.

In my gendered socialized thinking and formation, there were men and women: and I wasn't acting like a woman, which meant I had to act like a man. In those days, names attached to those sorts of mannish women were "Dykes" then later on, in my own *coming out*, "Butches." I was back from freshmen year of college when Stonewall shook the nation and my world. I was an outsider in a world underpinning my sexual identity; my knowledge of *those* people came from what I heard in muffled whispers around the dinner table. I knew nothing of the homosexual underground under my nose. When I learned about this network, I was curious and energized by the idea of a group of people like me, many of them caught up in the unrest of the 1960s, demanding to live and love free. I also watched as police beat, and dragged bloodied protesters off to jail.

That day in June 1969, I stood on the sidelines. First, I was behind the police stanchions barricading the area, not wanting to associate openly but secretly aching to join. Second, I was on the sideline of ever living *out* as lesbian. My church condemned me; my profession would prevent me living as a lesbian, and my family would not allow it. I would disappoint them. I was 19 and already a veteran of two failed love affairs, depression, cutting, and suspensions for fighting in high school. My first two attempts at college ended once to drugs and promiscuity, and the second time after briefly coming *out* in public to a secluded, closeted existence. Fear and pain are harsh taskmasters. Until recently, these experiences were cruel placeholders and constant reminders. Fear and pain made me self-police and directed my actions over a half-century of my life.

When I was in school as a student, and again as a teacher, same-sex organizations were few. The earliest same-sex advocacy organizations were in their infancy such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Human Rights Campaign (HRC),

and Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and programs supporting LGB then LGBTQ were non-existent. I stayed celibate all the years I taught school, I left full-time teaching in 1981. Today when I feel safe in public and private places, I am comfortable *out*, but those places are few. My experience of feeling totally free as a lesbian is online. Perhaps my new-found understanding came from the intensity of doing that pilot ethnography, or the puzzlement my physical world self experienced when asking, what I considered, private questions to other avatars who also have physical world personalities through the screen. I related my pain and feelings of physical world exclusion to that felt by adolescents who do not identify as LGBTQ or those who for reasons of family, friends, or church fail to recognize or admit same-sex attraction, or for those who cannot accept the risk of LGBTQ association (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). The Pew Study (2013) found that among their sample (n=1197), the median age at which LGBTQ adults first felt something other than heterosexual attractions was age 12; the median age of “knowing for sure” was 17 years.

Exploring identity online has the potential to be positive or potentially harmful (Jones, 2006). As stated earlier, users go to their online worlds seeking “emotional support, a sense of belonging and encouragement” (Cabiria, 2011, p. 307). Life inside virtual worlds is fluid. Relationships, identities, and environments are changeable with a few mouse clicks. Because of this characteristic, virtual worlds open creative pathways for individuals to explore relationships with others which influence their own sense of self or emotional sense of belonging (Blanchard & Lynn, 2002; Cabiria, 2011; Morley, 2001; Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). Social relationships that offer supportive environments motivate virtual world participants to join inworld groups (Watson &

Johnson, 1972). Second Life, in particular, gives participants a sense of place that in a physical world setting is otherwise difficult (Evans, 2011).

Mediated Identity: My Body, My Self (Hatred and Joy)

*“Enter a world with infinite possibilities and live a life
without boundaries, guided only by your imagination.”*

<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>; 2014

Shortly after World War I, my maternal grandfather emigrated from an area in Italy where light hair and skin color were the norms. My looks come from his gene pool. As a child, I was tall for my age, a red-headed tomboy with braids, a ruddy complexion, and freckled face. I never fit in with girls. On the playground, I was a leader of boys, in the classroom, I was in trouble. I talked to other students, answered without raising my hand, waved my arm when I knew the answer, too often out of my seat, or while looking out a classroom window. I received regular suggestions from the adults, “Try to be like the other girls or like your sister.” My elementary teachers were either Sisters from the Sisters of Charity or lay teachers—all of whom tried to tame my exuberant nature. Outside of school, I had a network of friends. I never felt out of place with them, but looking back, I realize that I did not *fit in* at school from the get go.

What I remember most about those pre-Stonewall years prior to 1969, were adult demands: “be like other girls,” “be a lady,” “stop playing with the boys.” These gender-saturated discussions began a decade before, around the time I was ten. Regardless, my dad still took me fishing, and the boys still chose me as the first pick on their teams. Otherness was of little concern to me until junior high when my body changed and the boys’ gaze moved from teammate to sexual mate. I was uncomfortable because I did not

see the boys in the same light. I began noticing girls and their bodies, much like mine, had a strange effect similar to what I envisioned listening to the conversations overheard between boys playing in my neighborhood. In school, I watched skewed heterosexist identity ballets with normative plots and pre-determined outcomes as girls performed normative femininity and, in turn, the boys performed normative masculinity. Connell (1995) purports masculinity as a multi role hierarchy. The boys may not have postured I ways that focused specifically on a typical role but the boys unknowingly benefited from their positionality in a patriarchal system that supported gender inequality (Connell, 1995). Like so many people with same-sex affiliations and sexual identities, I learned to navigate a crushing, normalizing school environment by passing as a straight girl. In junior high and high school, I commented on “hot looking boys”, laughed at “lesbo jokes”, mocked sissy boys and used “fag” in lockerroom gossip describing effeminate males. Looking back, I realize I was a product of a hidden curriculum, unknowingly learning heterosexism and sexism as part of the daily practices of schools (Meiners & Quinn 2012). I was in training to live in the closet.

Several months after her release from the hospital in the wake of her attempted suicide, my girlfriend visited me in my home. She shared her plans to move back with her mother in another state. I stood up over her giving her a goodbye kiss on her forehead. Unbeknownst to me, my father was looking at me through a slightly open bedroom door. He kicked the door in, yelled profane, bigoted remarks at me and told her to leave. After he had left, I went out on the attached bedroom porch over our garage, climbed down the fifteen-foot tall wall and ran away. I saw my father getting into his truck. I knew he was going out to look for me. I ran through the neighborhood backyards avoiding him. I

hitchhiked for miles then decided to call a friend. Her dad answered and talked to me for a while. I let him come get me and drop me off at home. The incident and the underlying issues were moot points among the adults involved. Nothing else would ever be said to me about either.

In my secret life, I would become “butch,” a title that came with a stereotypical set of actions that my lesbian 1960s community forced on me. My sexuality training came amid a patriarchal, heteronormative era of problematizing binaries like male/female, woman as not a man or lesbian woman as not man nor woman. Too young to join the broader conversation, I learned from my environment, to gaze upon girls as objects, and to dress and to act masculine (strong, dominant, and in charge). I learned sexism would be something I modeled in relationships for many years afterward. Today, my own actions amuse me at times; I still try to protect others. Even though I fight the urge to be in control when I am with a female, I move to hold doors open, offer to pick up a meal check, and move to walk on the curbside during strolls along a street. I laugh at myself thinking how well (sarcasm) I assimilated into my generation’s gender stereotypes.

The conceptual binaries of Technology vs. Nature, Masculine vs. Feminine, Male vs. Female, and “Man as Intellect and Woman as Nature” are fundamental archetypes of modernity. Amid the turmoil of the 1960s, postmodern discourse skeptical of modernity’s truths deconstructed what “woman” meant (Riley, 2003) and sharpened the dichotomy between perceptions of the term as subject or object. I was in college during the 1960s and in the workforce by the 1980s. Women were moving stepping out of traditional roles as mother, wife, and worker. The original Equal Rights Amendment was proposed to Congress by the National Women’s Party in 1923 (ushistory.org, 2016). By the time I

graduated college, supporters of the recently revived version had pushed hard to change national thinking about the roles women had played in America. Proponents of the Amendment lobbied, marched, rallied, petitioned, picketed, went on hunger strikes, and committed acts of civil disobedience (Francis, 2011). I was caught up in the push for student rights, gay rights, the HIV-Aids movement, and sports equality under Title IX, workplace dress code battles, and sexual harassment. I was female, athlete, lesbian, teacher and woman categorized by historical, scientific, social, cultural and political discourses, all technologies of the times (Foucault, 1988; 1993).

Haraway's (1991) analysis of technology as tools created and fashioned by a male scientific community underpinned by hegemonic power has the potential to change how we see the world. Her notions of masculine science, feminist theories, and identity formation envision cybernetic creatures. We, as humans, are embedded and integrated into our technologies; thus, we are changed by the very technologies we build. In *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), Haraway argues that female is neither a category nor embodies an essence or natural occurrence that binds all females together. The cyborg troubles the notion of "female" by asking what is the state of "being female?" (Haraway, 1991, p. 155). The cyborg escapes the traditional imprisonment of woman as child bearer at the center of the nuclear family existing of one man and one woman; the binary code's need for dualism, the non-dominant Other conjoined with (P)ower to be whole. Haraway's writing suggests that normative bodies and bodies as stand-alone subjects do not exist; we are all cyborg, intimately involved with machines, and that our bodies have undergone assimilation with our technology, eyeglasses, pacemakers, implants and replacements parts, running shoes, and pharmaceuticals. Very much like my own

avatar(s) and fundamental to this project, the cyborg is a hybrid organism, human and machine, a creature of social reality as well as one of fiction who critiques Western ideologies and dualisms (Haraway, 1991). The actions of a material world transform bodies and minds. The power of the cyborg lies in its political position “to see from both perspectives at once . . . each perspective revealing dominations and possibilities unimaginable through the eyes of the other” (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). In other words, because we are constantly reshaped by our environment (natural and technological) and to our environment (technological), we cannot understand our material world as a collection of simple objects. Technologies are the results of humankind’s scientific creativity in action; a need for us to evolve out of ourselves (Hall, 1983). Our advancements in technology enable new forms of embodiment; networks (Facebook), mediated knowing (news feeds, Pinterest, Twitter), high tech surveillance (drones, public cameras, YouTube), gnome project, sex change technology, advances in birth control, birthing and other medical devices. Using the Cyborg (machine and human) metaphorically suggests we become one with our technology problematizing the nature/culture binary.

Scholarship about virtual worlds is shifting toward virtual reality and modes of play where players physically interact in and with simulated environments rather than as avatar constructions acting in simulated environments. I reread Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* sometime in the 1990s, long before SL showed up in Cyberspace. I imagined a cyborg as a human/machine combination much like characters in old television shows like *The Six Million Dollar Man* or *The Bionic Woman*. A cyborg was a hybrid human with metal and plastic body parts added or substituted inside or outside the body, giving

the human owner super-human attributes: bigger, better, faster. I do not recall the emotions of the bionic characters, simply their new found powers. If we are all cyborg as Haraway critiques and deconstructs the dualisms in essentialist feminism and Western scientific discourse deconstructing long standing perspectives of socially-constructed gender identity. Haraway suggests a new perspective, a cyborg, a being that combines individuals with systems to create a new way of looking at gender identity. With advancements in interactive technologies I extend Haraway's notion asking, "is cyberspace moving us toward cyborg-space?"

Hiding Places: Home, School and Church

*"Second Life is a 3D world where everyone
you see is a real person, and every place
you visit is built by people just like you."*

<http://secondlife.com/whatis/>; 2014

Home:

My apartment in SL is my second home, a home far from that of my childhood. For many, home is a symbol of safety. My parents went to their graves without ever discussing with me the series of friends and roommates I have had over the years. My sister has lived overseas all of her adult life. When my parents needed extended care, I took them to my home. I felt it necessary to come out to my sister so she would have a better understanding of the living arrangements in my home. She frowned and shook her head to show her disdain. My sister is polite to my stepchildren but far removed from our Italian family dynamics. I'm sure the rest of my family and extended family lives in a "don't ask, don't tell" reality.

School:

As for my high school girlfriend—her parents sent her away. I'm not sure why, but the band members seemed to move on, and the taunting ceased. I believe, having music and people who could put my sexuality aside in public saved my life. I stayed alone deciding to try my luck at being straight. I dated without much effect or romance, at least, I had a prom date for his senior prom. He went off to college, and we corresponded for the next year, dating when he was in town. My parents were happy, my teachers seemed content with my behavior, and I was Captain of the Color Guard, active in band and had solo roles in the chorus. I played sports and was awarded an MVP trophy in basketball, a photographer for the yearbook and school paper. I received a music scholarship my senior year. Mid-year, my schoolmates, voted me into two honors "most school spirited" and "most athletic" but school rules against such an honor (sarcasm) required I choose one. I had been accepted to college. I was the good girl, outwardly compliant. Everyone was happy but me. I was alone, playing various roles and parts in a play orchestrated by society. I was outwardly successful and inwardly suicidal.

In the spring of my senior year in high school I have emotional ups and downs. I have mixed feelings of hope for the future and a nagging fear of the unknown. This particular day it's hard to get motivated; I feel like my life is ending. Only a couple of weeks until my eighteenth birthday, the end of school, graduation, college; leaving home. I think about how happy I should be, but I'm depressed. I have to hurry to get to my 11 a.m. special practice for the basketball playoffs. I don't remember the bus schedule so I'll have to bike a couple miles to the gym. The phone rings and my mother yells up the stairs, "Jan, it's for you." I pick up the extension and wait for her to hang up the phone

downstairs. Living in a closet, I learned about self-preservation tactics, mostly about silence and secrecy. I hear the phone click then say, "Hello." I hear a deep male voice, "Hello, it's me." I ordinarily would be ecstatic about hearing from my gay ex-boyfriend, I haven't seen him in a couple years. All I can make out is that he's crying and saying, "Please come over." "What happened?" I asked. He asks again, "Please come over." His cousin (a tag for his new lover) has attempted suicide. I ask his new address. It's near the gym. I tell him I'm on my way. I peddle cross town, as fast as my legs and lungs allow, to the street and slowly maneuver down the steep hill looking around for the house address. I see his sports car in the driveway and go to the back door. I find him sitting on the edge of his bed in his boxers, a white sleeveless undershirt.

I knock. He meets me with a long hug. As he begins speaking, he bursts into tears, and his knees give way. We both wind up sitting on the floor. He tells me that his lover was outed to his family, then swallowed a can of drain opener pellets, and that's all he knows. The boy's family won't tell him anything or even the name of the hospital he's in. He lays his head in my lap. I gently stroke his jet black hair attempting to comfort him. I glance at my watch then at the headboard bookcase over his bed noticing the open pill bottles and liquor. I lift him up and begin yelling about the bottle and booze asking if he's taken anything. He responds 'not yet,' but he was thinking about it, inferring had I not come over he'd probably have done it. I choose to stay with him rather than leave for basketball practice. I cannot call and tell my coach; I cannot call and tell anyone of this.

I sit with him for hours drying his tears, laughing about old times and joking about dating each other all the while being as he put it, "fucking faggots." He comes from wealth. I ask him if his family was experiencing financial woes that caused a downgrade

of his living arrangements. He tells me that his dad put him up in this place when he turned eighteen. His dad didn't want him in his house or ever to see him but felt he needed to support him until after graduation. We talk about his *cousin* whom he met at a Manhattan club. We contemplate adulthood wondering if we should just live straight. Neither of us is a virgin in the *straight* sense because of our need to *fit in* high school life. We begin laughing about straight sex. He blurts out, "Let's practice I'll take the bottom," to which I respond, "How do you figure?" His comeback is, "Well honey; I'm the one with the fashion sense and wiggle in my walk!"

I look back at the story and wonder. I wonder how my "ex" was: had he made it in adult life? I look past the ubiquitous LGBTQ high school life at the time, riddled with high dropout rates, suicide attempts, and suicide successes. I was forced to choose between my friend and my pre-championship game basketball practice knowing that staying with my friend had consequences. My coach called and asked why I did not attend practice. I told her I forgot. Terrified of what might happen, I did not *out* myself. The next day I was benched for my final high school game; I ached as I watched my team lose. The pain came from looking at my teammates and knowing my double digit scoring average would have made a difference.

Young people often taunt, bully, and act violently toward peers who self-identify as not fitting into their physical world classrooms due to such differences as gender, race, ability, religion, and sexuality (GLSEN, 2011; NEA, 2010). Mounting evidence documents the number of suicide-attempts, absenteeism, and lack of school faculty and staff support to be disproportionately high for youth who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) compared to their straight

counterparts (GLSEN, 2010; Kosciw et al, 2010; Toomey et al, 2011) clearly putting LGBTQ youth at risk of failing academically, dropping out, being bullied, and committing suicide. Since adolescents spend 7–8 hours per day in school, and perhaps an additional 1–4 hours in school-based, after-school activities, adolescents' experiences in schools can significantly influence their physical, intellectual, and emotional growth, development (Russell, 2006), and sense of well-being. Those youths who are LGBTQ are considered “at risk” because they must navigate school in socially treacherous waters, with fears of being *outed* and feelings of aloneness, difference, and hopelessness which often lead to a spectrum of behaviors such as depression, suicide, dropping out of school, and etc. (Elliot, 2012; Kosciw et al, 2010; Mayo, 2013; Pascoe, 2011; 2012).

Prior to 1984, individual schools held the power for granting permission for organizations to meet on school grounds. Simply put, if a school administration/school board thought an extracurricular group did not fit their particular criteria, the group did not meet on school property. The Equal Access Act of 1984 made it possible for diverse extracurricular clubs to meet on public school property (Lee, 2002). The law also opened the way for nationally-sponsored groups to support state- and local-sponsored extracurricular clubs. One such organization, the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), started in 1990 by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN), has become a national school organization furthering research poignantly highlighting issues of separation and integration. Schools are structured to maintain heterosexist education forcing and keeping students and staff who are other than heterosexual on the borders and margins of mainstream education.

Schools define community (Mayo, 2003) by allocating resources to accepted school organizations and groups reinforcing the hidden heteronormative sexuality curriculum. School organizations further marginalize by determining who may and may not participate (Blodgett, Xu, & Trauth, 2007; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Kumashiro, 2000; C. Lee, 2002; Mayo, 2003; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010; Worthen, 2013; Zoeterman & Wright, 2013). The National Education Association calls for acceptance of LGBTQ students. It suggests all adult members of the school community dealing with LGBTQ students should serve as allies (Kim, 2009). The NEA further posits that educators should accept LGBTQ adults as well. In spite of the NEA's vision and guidelines, some schools reflect a contrary view of current sexuality politics. Student Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) and Allies for Youth (Ally) activism place responsibility for changing sexual binaries in the hands of students rather than in the hands of adults (Mayo, 2013). Franklin County Tennessee, (Tennessee has GSA networks) as recently as February, 2016, found themselves under national scrutiny when parents spoke out against the school GSA the institution had approved in December 2015. Parents contacted the school demanding leaders move the GSA off campus (Ring, 2016; Wilson, 2016). GSA posters were vandalized, and social media erupted in comments and condemnations.

Recent Presidential candidates characterize "don't ask, don't tell" policies (1994) instigated during the Bill Clinton presidency to govern the behavior and speech of gays serving in the U.S. Military as simply "not knowing any better at the time." Such wording dismisses responsibility and opting for ignorance and "stupidity" as an excuse for ignoring action that would end formal discrimination against LGBTQ individuals in the

military. Schools much like virtual worlds are sites of negotiation between constraints and possibilities, invention and innovation and, learning and living well. Adults in schools or those who make decisions on behalf of students must move beyond the excuse of simply, “not knowing.” My own experience teaches me that living privately and living in a closet is not the same; one is a choice, the other oppression.

Lee’s (2002) study about belonging to GSAs is one of the earliest works on such organizations, laying groundwork for inquiry on and about identity, belonging, and visibility in the public schools. Lee’s work concluded that the possibility of coming out was due in part to the visibility of the LGBTQ movement (p. 13). GSAs created a place where students could engage in positive social aspects and personal formation of identity but posits that schools are slow to act on such organizations. Students in Lee’s study expressed feelings of hopelessness and despair and reported that becoming involved in their GSA felt empowering. Lee concluded that GSAs empower through collective goal-setting and action, and against an oppressive system (p. 24).

Mayo (2003) uses queer theory to argue how ethical communities are encouraged through the presence of school alliances between same-sex and heterosexual youth such as GSAs. Mayo contends that in a climate of sexual politics and conservative values against LGBTQ activities and curricula, GSAs promote strong positive associations in schools. However, some states require extracurricular activities to have parental notification or permission that force teens to *out* themselves, in many cases causing a problem for questioning or closeted youths (Mayo, 2013). Teen curiosity rather than social tourism fuels ethics which form community in a number of ways, including how same-sex and heterosexual youth question their identities, genders, and associations with

their own sexuality and that of the “others” (Mayo, 2003, p. 28). Such associations, she posits, break binaries and benefit all sexualities.

Bourdieu argues that school practices ensure social reproduction of class hierarchies and statuses. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Schools enforce institutional power through cultural and inherent educational scaffolding often thwarting LGBTQ friendly groups efforts to join school culture as equals. Understanding school politics is of import because it underpins how one understands the role of GSAs in school settings. GSA roles and systems was the focus of a qualitative study of 22 schools participating in Massachusetts’s Safe Schools Program (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003). The Griffin et al. study focused on how “GSAs were or were not connected to the overall school efforts to become safe for LGBTQ students” (Griffin et al., 2003, p. 18). The study identified GSAs then situated four key functions: as a support group in counseling, as a safe space, as a vehicle for raising awareness, and as part of a broader school effort for educating about LGBTQ people (Griffin et al., 2003, p. 11). Each category highlighted benefits and shortcomings of each position. The study evidenced an overall positive positioning of GSAs in relation to schools’ overall comprehensive organizational plan, suggesting that as a guide, all schools first address LGBTQ issues. The study concluded that in order to succeed in changing overall school climate, schools must begin recognizing social justice values including a comprehensive examination of heterosexism and gender oppressions in individual school communities (Mayo, 2013).

The name ‘Gay-Straight Alliance’ suggests a bond between named subjects. However, some research measuring feelings of safety seemed to capture a subject’s perceived safety rather than a culture of tolerance, acceptance and growth based on bona

vide school policy oriented to preventing bullying or actions within a school (Walls et al., 2010). GSAs can benefit schools when their value is equal to all other organizations. As Griffin et al. (2003) argued, GSAs were found to fall into four categories, one of which was counseling. Research finds that counseling has an overwhelming positive affect on heterosexual and same-sex youth. However, what is found to be positive with immediate or long range outcomes differ according to urban or rural settings and geographic regions (Griffin & Ouelett, 2003). Nevertheless, researchers associate unquestionable positive outcomes with GSAs in schools. Additionally, recent work suggests positive carryover into young adulthood among college students (Worthen, 2013). According to GLSEN (2016), all but eleven states have GSAs. When are GSAs not enough? What about the students who do not identify as LGBTQ or those who for reasons of family, friends, or church fail to recognize or admit same sex attraction? Or for those who cannot accept the risk of LGBTQ association? (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Recent results in GLSEN's 2013 longitudinal study of school experience of LGBTQ shows that GSAs or similar type clubs were present in 53% of participating schools. However, 32.3% of students who responded in the study had not participated in them (Kosciw, Greytak, Boesen, & Palmer, 2014). Social media is now an established phenomenon and seems to be growing exponentially in all areas of the country as places where LGBTQ youth make sense of their sexuality by connecting and interacting in online places featuring a larger LGBTQ community in chatrooms, and websites (Gray, 2009; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). These media changes speak to the potential of sites such as Avatars, in spaces such as Second Life, to facilitate learning about the self-in-culture.

Church

I looked directly into an immense church bell tower. The morning Angelus rang out, rattling the window pane as the sound seemed to push through the glass, making my head pound. Even burying my head in pillows and blankets did not muffle the grand sound of the bells. Each morning I rolled out of bed onto my knees and, with elbows on my mattress, began morning prayers. The Church was the center of my neighborhood community and bulwark of my family community. My Italian family members were active and devoted church members. My folks enrolled us in Parochial school where I grew up in and around the Catholic faith. Hours were spent helping the sisters clean the convent, take care of the church altars, candles, and vestments. By the time I was seven years of age, I was praying throughout the day. Even when the Angelus rang out on Saturdays, we in the Parochial school would stop our bikes, sometimes skidding wildly out of control, stand down off our seats and pray. I learned to pray and ride at the same time, speeding down the hill in a race, letting go of the handle bars, crossing myself and bowing my head as I zipped past the “Blessed Sacrament” housed in a tabernacle on the main altar of the church.



Figure 6. Church of my Youth

Before the 1960 Ecumenical Conference, the Mass was in Latin, and Catholic pomp and circumstance with its ritual and grand history were this mysterious, wonderful part of my life. We had classifications for our sins; mortal sins sent you to hell if you couldn't get them handled through the sacrament of confession before you died, but all others were venial sins for which you would receive a stint in Purgatory, this place of cleansing between heaven and earth. During pre-Pope John XXIII years, indulgences were still a part of our church. Indulgences were sort of like a get-out-of-jail-free card. I used to keep a journal of them. If I blessed myself with the sign of the cross, it was worth some level of indulgence. If I blessed myself with holy water, it was higher. Attending mass on weekdays, giving alms, and so on gave a Catholic time off on their Purgatory stint. By the time I was eight, I had 11 years of indulgences racked up. Catholic rules were pretty simple; mortal sin meant you were banished, kicked out, made an outsider. Repenting and Confession provided avenues back into the fold.

In 1960, we had new rules coming. Mortal sins were reclassified, and we were going to be able to eat meat on Fridays. I wondered about those souls who had previously eaten meat on Fridays and were in hell because of it. One day during religion class, I raised my hand when chosen, stood up and respectfully asked the question, "Sister, are the people in hell for eating meat going to be let into heaven?" Everyone laughed. My school and home life were similar in the way discipline was handed out. The Sisters had little trouble maneuvering down a crowded aisle of desks with arms flailing and veil waving in the wind they stirred if they needed to discipline a student. Pity the student receiving the wrath. I tried to avoid it at every turn.

Catholic nor public school children were taught about sexuality. Though being a Tomboy would get me in worldly trouble, I had no clue growing up that growing from Tomboy to the realization of life as lesbian would keep me out of Catholic Heaven until the church took a public stance when, in 1968, the American Psychiatric Association introduced the revised Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMII) in which homosexuality was still listed as a mental illness! By now I was in high school, getting ready to graduate. My life was marked by having 'a mental illness'. My church, as did many other churches, *othered*, me and society seemed to pity me. My church, like other heterosexist institutions, would try to *cure* me of my illness. I felt alone; my world disbanded. Why? How could God make me vile, sick, an abomination? Was there no good in me? All my lived years amounted to nothing? Was I destined to spend eternity in Hell? For the longest time I believed that I was a sinner, I hated myself, cut myself, turned to drugs, and moved closer on a collision course with myself.

The politics of the late 1960s, Vietnam, Gay Pride, and Women's Liberation would all be realized during my college years. Disappointed and dismayed at the lack of LGBTQ inclusion and acceptance, I left the church and tried various Protestant sects. The organized religions I tried had the same message: I am a sinner, a bad person, beyond forgiveness if I do not change. My soul was dead. During my adolescent years, the guilt and shame were unbearable at times (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Dahl & Galliher, 2009). I was destined to a life without God even though I attended mass or other religious services. I kept my Catholic faith for nearly 30 years after. I now pray daily, not for forgiveness, because I've done nothing wrong. As I was so aptly taught to do as a Catholic Soldier of Christ, I pray for my enemy, the Church in which I was

baptized. I pray the Holy Mother Church will see the light of God's word, not words written by men nearly 30 years after Christ's death. The church has made me invisible to her. What a terrible loss for her.

In a 2013 Religious Landscape Study conducted by Pew Research Center 35,000 American adults responded. 5% (1197) LGBT American adults reported that society is more accepting of them. Over the past decade, trending is up with a 92% positive response from LGBTQ participants about societal acceptance (Pew, 2013). Researchers attribute these changes to the general population's increasing knowledge about LGBTQ, interacting with one or more people who identify as part of that community, advocacy from non-profit organizations, and LGBTQ adults raising families—a positive trend that is expected to continue (Pew, 2013). Even in my Southern, socially and religiously conservative, politically right-wing location, positive attitudes toward me are changing slowly and sporadically. While society is more welcoming, major religious groups are slower to respond. LGBT adults feel that most major religious faiths are unwelcoming 59% percent of the LGBT respondents noted religious affiliations, 49% Christian as compared to the 71 percent reporting of the general population (Pew 2013). Additionally, 41 percent of LGBT respondents are unaffiliated with a major religion.

I have spirituality but need some religious affiliation in my life. Moving from the East Coast to the Southern Plains to pursue a Ph.D., I was miles from my family and their disdain for LGBTQ people. Catholic by birth but occasionally Protestant by association, I joined or attended a number of churches over the years. I sought out churches designated “welcoming” churches or “welcoming” ministries affiliated with Episcopal, Methodist, Metropolitan Community Church, and others. I was recently actively involved

with a Protestant “reconciling” church. It was my first experience totally *out* and I felt comfortable and safe. I did not feel as if I was a curiosity even when I would show affection to my partner, eliciting an occasional forced smile. I was with straight folks each week who openly accepted me. A year or so ago, one of our ministers performed a marriage between his gay son and the son’s partner. Our synod leaders threatened to defrock the minister and in so doing, created a political upheaval among the faithful. During the church’s annual national meeting which developed long range plans, church governance voted down full membership for LGBTQ individuals. Thus, national church leaders also denied marriage and ordination for that community. The wording of the edict sounded as if the church reinforced their call as a reconciling ministry; they tolerated me and forgave me. The definition of reconciling became evident, though. This church as others before was telling LGBTQ people that something was wrong with them even though we could worship, receive sacraments, hold PFLAG meetings, and financially support the church! God is love, but not me? God is good, but not to me? I am in constant conflict with Holy Mother church (Lapinski, McKirnan, 2013; Levy, Edmiston, 2014). I am an adult, and I am afraid to express my *outness* beyond this sort of closed community. What is there for LGBTQ youth without access to strong allies in proximity to them? Again, I am disappointed and dismayed by organized religion. I turn to SL looking for a quiet place to reflect and think about my rejection. I start a land search using keywords; church, meditation, solitude. A long list returns and I read the ‘blurbs’ about each. I visit several before choosing. I now attend Holy Angels Church in Second Life.

* * *

I teleport gently landing in the church's park-like setting, and I am always put at ease. Pastor Crystalmom Bunnyhug attends to every detail. I seem only to see Pastor during services, but anytime I arrive a birdie, Pastor's bot greeter, whispers a greeting as I near the church entrance. When I respond by typing my greeting, the bot returns a message from the pastor. I know that I can message the pastor, and I will receive a response. Today, I am simply enjoying the seasonal décor. The walkways and paths are dotted with pumpkins, the trees are changing color, and leaves are falling. Off in the distance, a deer is grazing under tall pines, and a peacock is showing his colors as tree leaves slowly glide to earth. There are secluded, quiet spaces where I can sit and listen to the wide variety of contemplative music coming through my computer speakers as I walk about the area. I do not know much about Pastor Bunnyhug, but I feel as quiet and connected in Holy Angels, SL, as I ever felt in a brick and mortar church. The only thing missing is the scent of incense. There is no service today, so all I do is sit and think about whatever comes to mind. I am at peace and ready to start my day.



Figure 7. Images of Holy Angels Church in Second Life

* * *

Choosing my degree path and college out-of-state turned my home into a battleground. Dad's craft and skill made his client list one of social elites. Corporate leaders, business owners, attorneys, and physicians waited months for him to transform their homes and offices. Dad respected education. Whenever I went with him to a job, I would have to look, act, and speak respectfully. I'm sure my father spoke with his clients about my future educational endeavors because he was fixated on my becoming a pharmacist. I wanted Music and Physical Education; Dad demanded a local pharmacy school. Mom, trying to compromise suggested nursing, shared her own dashed dreams of wanting to be a nurse having had to quit school in eighth grade to help Poppi (my grandfather) with money. The more my father demanded, the more I dug in. I was going far from here, away from the secrecy and pain. I even managed to upset the center of my universe, my grandmother. The four-block walk from my house to Nani's house gave me time to cool down. I went to Nani's house trying to escape the insanity going on in my house only to find that she'd been on the phone with Mom. My grandmother cried about my leaving telling me how she longed for the opportunity to have her own mother (living in Italy) to tea and how hard it was to live with only the occasional letter. I tried to reassure Nani, that a phone call was only a few cents per minute. It was then that I agreed to a promise she made me make to call every Sunday. The calling lasted over 20 years. I could be in the midst of playing ball or out with friends, I never forgot my promise, I'd find a phone and make the call. From the other end, I'd always hear, "eh, Jena, you sounda so close, where are you dolleee?"

The school counselors found a small Methodist school in Iowa and spoke to my mother about it. A Methodist college in Iowa was the setting for my first attempt at a degree. It was an utter failure. Mom probably did not know that Iowa and Methodist would cause culture shock. I tried to conform to heterosexual norms by playing straight only to end up pregnant. College life was as tumultuous as high school. Use of drugs and risk-taking, anti-social behaviors constantly put me in harm's way. In my pre-Stonewall, DSM II homosexuality disease state (sarcasm), exploring same-sex bars was dangerous, with police raids and harassment making socializing dangerous and illegal. As so often has been the case in my life, I was privileged to have adults and mentors who saw value in me and helped me to move forward. I trusted them and tried to meet their expectations of me which often meant going against myself. I had two choices, stay celibate or stay hidden. I lived mostly in my first choice until loneliness would get the better of me. I remember feeling as if my personal weakness was sinful somehow breaking a moral code. I felt dirty. I would go to Confession only for my priest to reprimand me and keep telling me to seek "Grace," looking back I'd laugh about it with friends stating, "I'd never found nor dated Grace!" The Catholic Church, then and now does not accept me. Religious Institutions, churches, schools, colleges, among others seem to take the stance that they are persecuted because of government threats to hold financial support. Lower court legal battles and the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage is now the law-of-the-land making marriage legal in all fifty states. As recently as 2015, the 121 member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, the accrediting arm of the evangelical Higher-Ed institutions, were debating their "human sexuality statements" based on Evangelical interpretation of Biblical references. Twelve member colleges

either have strengthened or stayed with their current handbooks defining marriage as one man and one woman (Wheeler, 2015). In 2016, The Battle continues in spite of the law. Southern States' Legislatures are embroiled with corporations, sports and entertainment entities because of recent bans on LGBTQ rights.

Youthful desires were too strong during college times. I'd seek out companionship, *in hiding*, never able to reveal my secrets, even to my closest friends. I graduated and found a teaching position in a place where I felt I could do some good for children who might otherwise feel helpless. I was in a long-distance relationship and felt guilt-ridden hiding it. I lived in constant fear of losing my job because of my sexual identity. I chose to hide intimate relationships to avoid breaches of heterosexist moral clauses in teaching contracts. I left teaching almost 30 years ago because I could no longer bear to live a life devoid of intimacy and relationships. It seemed I had to choose between a career I loved and being loved. I took a position in industry. I found myself among approximately 1500 men, the only woman not in a secretarial or customer service type-position. I was a college educated woman in a historically all-male job classification, a story with all the trappings of a feminist novel.

When our company introduced the first personal computers (PC's) in 1981, they placed them in the overwhelmingly male engineering departments. The computer had a keyboard; the attitude in the office was that I was female, therefore I typed. The computer was placed near my desk although I was not the department's secretary. It was my lucky day. The tools that belonged to the gender specific role of secretaries were ignored by my male counterparts. I was given the task, "learn it." The first project the staff assigned to me was to figure out the new IBM (International Business Machines) DOS (Disk

Operating System) and then design and code a color menu. I fell in love with computers. By 1985, I was sent to workshops and training courses on programming and became fluent in database management for our department and several corporate projects. Work was fun; I was part of a group of *techies* who collectively cared about one thing, the technology. Fun at work became an outlet at home. By this time, I had a computer at home complete with early, non-Internet connected gaming equipment.

The Importance of Growing Up in Community

Sometime during the late 1950s or early 1960s, our church decided to build additions to existing buildings requiring the congregation to pledge to a building fund. The church members received boxed and labeled building fund tithing envelopes handed out after Sunday Mass. My parents paid what they could. Around this time, my grandfather found a house for sale located near his, offering to purchase it as a lien holder for my mom and dad. My parents moved us to the home, after (1959) they signed the building fund pledge. Life as I knew it drastically changed when my parents moved us from blocks of apartment houses to a neighborhood with neatly rowed single family dwellings. It was what I later realized as an upper middle/lower upper class section of town without kids. My sister and I stayed in the Catholic school and church but at the beginning of the following term the school transferred us for political reasons stemming from the church tithing pledge. We went to parochial school on Monday. During the day, I was called to the office and was handed a white envelope with my parents' names on it. I thought I was in trouble and became ill over the course of the morning. When I was sent back to the office, the Principal barked asking if I'd opened the envelope. I had not but thought it was about me and made myself ill over the prospect of an impending beating

when I got home. I remember thinking about what was about to happen while handing my mother the note. Later, I came to know that the note was a forced transfer because my father was unable to continue his financial pledge. My mom was visibly upset and my dad angry. I do not remember much of the conversation, but he was yelling about taking us to public school. During our time in Catholic school (1955-1963), there existed an underlying tension between Catholic school children and Public school children fueled by the Jewish connection to Christ's martyrdom. For my sister and I, thinking about attending public school was traumatic. I remember feeling frightened, and my sister cried.

Catholic school uniform dress codes consisted of a green tunic jumper with a crisp white blouse, and sporty white/green saddle shoes. I learned strict restraint and regimentation through schooling rituals and the clothing I wore daily. There was a comfort in the sameness and constancy of a parochial education. We did not wear makeup or display fancy hair styles. My parents spent a good deal of money on my upperclassman uniforms only weeks before my school transfer. My parents always purchased high-quality clothing items for us. We had leather shoes with substantial stitched on soles, Irish linen-mixed cotton blouses and wool and gabardine jumpers; clothing that was made to last! My mother did purchase a newly created wash-and-wear type blouse to test. I was happy the fabric cut down on the ironing time for me. Because our uniforms were special order, and we had worn them for several weeks, my family could not return them. I was made to wear them to public school.

The day after the envelope incident, our forced transfer out of Catholic school, Mom enrolled us in public school. My sister and I had been in our old school for several

weeks when we were transferred. It was the first time we would attend different schools. My sister attended an elementary school and I attended the junior high on the other side of town. Mom dropped my sister off at my grandmother's and took me to enroll in junior high. We walked into a huge office painted light green separated by a long dark Formica top counter half the length of the room. I stood chin high to the counter but could see through the wall of windows overlooking the front walk and flagpole. There were offices in each corner with two desks, one outside of each office. On the right, at the far end of the long counter near the end, a hinged section could be lifted that gave people access to the other side of the counter. Rows of little square boxes all connected to each other all with open fronts covered the wall along that side of the office. It looked like letters were in them. As adults walked in and out of the trap-door they passed and took papers out of the boxes then walked to the desks and dropped off stacks of things. The people who seemed to work at those desks would take the stacks of papers, write notes on them, return through the trap door and walk through one of two doors at the right corner of the office where several chairs lined that section of a spare wall. I wasn't sure what was in that space, but I saw it was next door to a room with a door and half opaque glass labeled "Nurse." I didn't know it at the time, but I'd spend a great deal of time in this space throughout my school year.

I remember the principal asking for school transcripts to place me in comparable classes. My mother did not have them, so the man (I'd never seen a male teacher, let alone a male principal) asked me questions that I answered honestly. I remember him telling my mother that I was behind in my work. At the time, I had all superior grades but somehow was behind by public school standards. I stood there embarrassed, feeling alone

and out of place, friendless and scared. I wanted to leave but had nowhere to go. A bell sounded, and students poured out of classrooms chattering and running in the halls. All I could think of at the time was that I wanted to go back to the safety of my school, not be here in this noisy, chaotic public school. I was placed in classes with common subjects I could not understand. This place made me feel as I was not smart. I did not know enough to understand if my work was correct or incorrect and because my parents were unable to help me with homework, I struggled to keep up. Later on, I realized Catholic schools taught subject matter in a different order than did the Public School. I did not know at the time that my mom had attended school with him and the school nurse or that they knew each other outside of this place. I'm sure the conversation between them was less official than I thought it was. I never was spoken to nor did I speak. As a twelve-year-old in a strange new learning environment, I felt inferior, and this feeling would color my academic, personal and social behavior for years to come.

My first class that day was second year French class. Unfortunately, I'd never taken beginning first-year French! As I walked in the classroom with my Catholic school uniform and white and green saddle shoes, everyone stared at me. Even worse, when I was asked a question I jumped to my feet (as was required in Catholic school), I heard everyone roar with laughter. I remember after class my teacher smiling at me. She tried to encourage me by telling me to sit and listen; I'd 'pick it up.' I never did—flunking every marking period until the end! The learning curve, looking back, was steeper than I was able to handle. I was caught between Catholic school and Public school, between straight A's in one to F's in the other. Math, History, English and Reading were the same. To make matters worse, I was in two courses (Science and Physical Education) I'd never

knew existed in the school curriculum. I flunked every classroom subject during the six-week grading period; I flunked PE too. I was so taken in by the gym and the equipment and excited about this class that I guess I wasn't listening. I also didn't know I had to take everything home every week to wash it or put white polish on my sneakers. One morning I had dark marks and one of the girls handed me chalk and told me to put it on my shoes. The teacher came down the row for inspection and looked at my shoes asking me if I put chalk on them, I smiled and said, "yes" . . . never knew I was getting a zero for the day every time I did that. During attendance, I'd be fooling with a basketball or looking around the gym. I didn't know that standing in rows arranged alphabetically was important. I thought it was just attendance. All my father could say was, "How the hell did you fail PE?" I'm not sure why the school administrator did not give my mother a list or council me early on. In Catholic school lists sent home to parents were the norm. Parents knew what and what not to do from school lunches and money to Sunday Mass expectations. My mother went to the school and found out the PE rules. The damage had been done; I was labeled a trouble maker. I remember during that time asking my parents about attending the local Catholic School. The answer was, "NO." I felt stupid and alone at school and cried myself to sleep most nights.

Catholic school and my strict Italian upbringing were orderly. Strict structural and cultural rules were not bent, excuses were not accepted, and actions at odds with those rules had consequences for those who crossed lines. Public school forced another set of cultural and societal rules very different from Catholic school. I know my mom gave it little thought that the clothes would make me stand out. I was embarrassed and made fun of when I stood to answer questions in class. I still cringe when remembering a time in

class when my response to a male teacher was “yes, sister” causing a roar of laughter and taunting from my classmates. My mother picked up on my mood changes. I told her about my clothes. We did not have much money, but Mom decided that I should no longer wear my uniforms but wear my Sunday dresses with short heels to school instead (really bad idea). There I was in my Sunday best wearing small stubbed high heels that caused me to slip and slide on the school floors. The first day I wished I was back in my uniform, at least in my green and white saddle shoes, I could run! I must have been crying to my grandmother because the next week Nani (a tailor/dressmaker too) came over to the house sporting three new skirts; one dark green plaid, one dark red plaid, and a dark brown/black squares; all three matched well with my uniform blouses and those confounded green and white saddle shoes! I felt so much better, but it didn’t do much good, I still got mocked for having homemade clothing. The irony in this story is that as a tailor, my grandmother made expensive shirts for many of the same children’s families. My school uniform, clothing that labeled me as part of an elite group of students now named me as *other* (Leck, 2000; Pascoe, 2012). It still hurt deeply. Three months into the school year, I felt lonely and bereft for the first time in my memory.

We transferred our church membership. I do not know if the fact that my dad was still angry indicated that the local Catholic tuition was a financial burden or if he had other reasons for the change but we stayed in public school. I began failing nearly all my subjects that year, getting into numerous fights and finding for the first time in my life I was a loner. My behavior at home changed, I was made to conform to my parent’s expectations through physical force. By Christmas, I was cutting myself with razor blades and causing pain by punching brick walls.

My music teacher had gotten me a musical gig with an older group of his students. For the time being I would experience a renewed feeling of success. At school, I figured out that a class-clown was an avenue to fitting in. I learned the role of class-clown well developing a reputation as a trouble maker that followed me to high school landing me in and out of in-school suspension over the next two years. An extension of my class clown persona was getting thrown out of class. My failing grades underpinned the school's decision to enroll me in special education classes. Much of the bullying and taunting from girls had ended, but the boys' taunting started once I developed breasts. While before they considered me their teammate, their football and baseball compatriot, they suddenly shifted to calling me "moose" or "Sam Huff" and these epithets were accompanied by sneers and snickers. I found myself in the H.S. Principal's office once again for beating down a few of the bullies. I was a behavior problem and assigned to remedial sections of mainstream courses.

The summer before my freshman year in high school the principal from my junior high moved to the high school. He knew I knew music because of an incident in junior high that shed light on me as a trouble maker kid with talent. He asked the band director to intercede, hoping that music might serve as an outlet for me as it had in junior high. The unsuspecting music teacher handed me a sheet of music and asked if I could read music. I shrugged my shoulders and nodded "yes". He plunked out notes on the piano and asked me to sing the phrase. I sang it flawlessly and then finished the page in tune. He was the band teacher; I was not sure why I was asked to take a singing test. He asked me what I wanted to play, and I asked him what he needed. He said, "tuba" (Sousaphone). In those days, girls rarely played tuba or Sousaphone. He gave me a quick

lesson, handed me a tuba and a book. I asked if I could take it home then hauled it to the local public bus stop, a really big mistake. Amid the grumbling of the bus driver and rush hour passengers, I pushed and prodded the huge case to the back of the bus. After the response from my father and I considered the idea of this twice daily trek, I took the next bus back and decided on a trombone instead. My life changed temporarily for the better. I loved music and immersed myself in it. Playing in the band gave me a feeling of community, and enough connection to feel as if I was part of something even in spite of occasional strife. By midyear, I was in mainstream classes pulling acceptable grades to stay in the school band.

Some researchers posit that community-building activities such as sports and clubs that take place in and out of schools have positive social and academic outcomes for the at-risk youth who participate (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Certainly, traditional school activities as football, wrestling, cheerleading, chess club, and Spanish club do not meet all students' needs (Perrotti, & Westheimer, 2002). School activities often offer little to prevent adolescents at high risk of suicide and dropping out, particularly LGBTQ youth, from choosing such actions (Griffin et al., 2003; Hackford-Peer, 2010) and generally fail to prevent those same students' peers from taunting, bullying, and committing violence against them. Even the currently accepted national LGBTQ organizations present in public schools or those involved in school politics do not ensure LGBTQ youths' safety, protection, or social acceptance, much less their rights and liberties (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, Safe Schools Coalition, Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gay {PFLAG}, American Civil Liberties Union {ACLU}, and Gay Straight Alliance {GSA}). Membership in these organizations or attending their

meetings may attract unwanted attention to these young people (Griffin & Ouellette, 2003; Hackford-Peer, 2010).

GSAs were a new resource in 1998. During the 1960s, my junior high and high school years, LGBTQ teens had few resources, if any, that did not involve trying to change them or pray for them. Homosexuality was a disease and a sin in most if not all religions. I had to hide my sexuality in pre-service college teaching too, even though I was dabbling with danger in my week jaunts to gay bars in Rockford, Ill, and Chicago. I could not speak about what it was like for me traipsing in and out of my closet or how one would go about their outing, but I could offer face-to-face support to those whom I knew to be struggling with their own homosexuality. The Internet soothed fears and loneliness. Communities were *out there* in cyberspace.

A series of technological and personal shifts occurred. Local Internet via Token Rings moved into Ethernet, dial-up to broadband, and on to WI-FI. During the 1990s, I was living in a failed relationship. It had been a status-quo type of relationship; she spent too many hours at work, I spent too many hours online, neither of us was able to admit that the love was gone. During that period in my life, I spent most evenings online in my basement family room. I remember one particular session lasted into the early morning hours. I hooked up with an online friend who had sounded sad during our last several sessions. That night she shared feelings of suicide. My brain reeled with quiet panic as my fingers tried to share my emotion in words. I felt frantic. When I could no longer type my feelings, nor feel her feelings through her words, I asked her to please speak with me. She offered her phone number. I kept her on the phone offering nothing more than a

break from her loneliness that seemed as dark as the night outside. I learned lessons from my experience.

Early avatars were picture-icons, roughly measuring .25". Before interactive uploads from electronic devices, users choose from an array of pictures offered through the Internet supplier. Later on, users could download from other Internet places. They were merely pictures! I used flowers snowscapes, sunsets and cartoons. My picture-style avi was nothing like today's new technologies offering 3D human form, and abilities enabling avi(s) to move and speak. Early inanimate avatars connected me to other avatar-icons in ways I had never thought about. Connecting was a step above calling on a telephone but the visual, even if it was a picture, made the conversation more human. I felt a human connection, almost enabled to reach through a screen, felt a presence in my interaction with my contact, be in community with a group, and be of assistance to a stranger and all from my seat in front of a computer. The experience changed my relationships with my computer, my avatar, and my perceptions of online venues for entertainment and information-only sites. I did not expect to change my life's course in an evening; I think the experience did. In that instance, my avatar was my teacher, and I was her student. My friend and I continued communicating through the night. By daylight (in Boston), the avatar-turned-human seemed to have moved past the crisis. I stayed close to her for several years after that. Her avatar was never the same to me. Each time we typed our conversations, I heard her voice in the words. The light-hearted "chat room" turned life or death connection disrupted my thinking. I wondered about how this computer, my work tool by day, somehow was becoming my social connection by night and another's lifeline, even if for a brief moment. In 2000, 55% of online teens and 28%

of online adults used chat rooms, but by 2005, that number had fallen to 18% of teens and 17% of adults (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Changes in the chat room developed from technological innovations, cell phone use, and expanding choices of social Internet sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010).

As in the case of human rights issues that have entered law through policy, statutes, bills, and constitutional amendments, LGBTQ youth's rights, liberties, protections, and safeties are already protected, via the *in loco parentis* legal and moral charge to administrators, teachers, staff, and schools to act or function in the place of good parents, to harm no child. Perhaps administrators, faculty, and staff overlook these rights, liberties, protections, and safeties because they are guaranteed to all children in public schools. Specific legislation focusing attention on these issues among students will force school personnel truly to act in the place of good parents working toward safe places where children are unharmed. Currently, only thirteen states have anti-bullying laws or other nondiscrimination laws designed to protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and only one state has non-discrimination laws designed to protect students based on sexual orientation but not gender identity (GLSEN, 2013). Although some states and school districts provide professional development for in-service teachers, staff, parents, and student peers regarding diversity and LGBTQ issues, in particular, many states do not.

While such national organizations as Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), Safe Schools Coalition, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) champion LGBTQ students' rights, liberties, safety, and protection in and out of public schools,

these organizations are inadequate to the task and may attract unwanted attention to the LGBTQ youth they seek to protect and support (Griffin et al., 2003; Hackford-Peer, 2010). Until such time as legislation and education converge to alter negative public opinion based upon ignorance and fear toward LGBTQ individuals, sexually diverse and gender non-conforming individuals remain particularly at risk. Students at risk of failing, dropping out, being bullied or committing suicide need viable alternatives to school classrooms and school-sponsored, extra-curricular activities.

Online Gaming: Situating myself *In* and *Out*

Near the end of my time in AOL (America Online), several of my AOL group started talking about Second Life. My experiences in AOL and my gaming participation made Second Life's new concept, "virtual world" intriguing. I thought this virtual world would be similar to an animated chat room. It was not. My newer 2D avatar and her human form felt empowering to me. I could move about interacting with human and non-human forms in a number of storybook backdrops. She represented me in ways I never before experienced in other games. It was exciting and provocative; through avatars, I found new ways of connecting with myself and people. She was a bridge to another place, a reflection of my heart's deepest feelings manifest in a form of my creation, my desires playing out online before my eyes. In my avatar I could act and interact online in ways, I could not in my first life. I was in control of my *other*. My avi(s) were not simple snapshots or picture icons; they had shape and movement. I could watch her as she interacted with other players as differently aged, educated, geographically-located or any number of truths or half-truths. Through the screen, I watched animated versions of myself acting out in ways that I could only think about previously. I felt safe in my

anonymity and could express feelings and ideas that in my first life I could not. We could share ideas about the game or who we were in other lives. In the other games, I had goals and purpose, and my avi was important. In my other games, my avatars and I had different relationships. My game avi(s) were more like game pieces I chose to use much like real world Monopoly pieces except I could customize minimally my avi(s). Still, they were simply moving game pieces. I did not reflect on my other game avatars as I came to do with RS or Ram in Second Life. Second Life was about living in a virtual world and all that living in both public and private spheres suggest. RS was my guide, my teacher through, with her then later on as her, I learned about joy in being free and *out* in the safety of anonymity. Learning to (re)live in second life was and still is an educational process.

When I first joined Second Life, I thought the learning curve was too steep; after all, I held down a full time job which required a great deal of travel and had limited time to spend in another alternate life. When I came home, I did not want to have to learn. Eventually, I left the AOL group and lost interest in quest games as well. Our high school reunion planning committee used a new social media, a precursor to Facebook, called Classmates.com. I joined and participated, but it never held my interest. Less than a year later, I went back to Second Life for a second look. This time, I stayed.

Playing online games challenges me. I feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction each time I complete quests or level up or hang out with other players during downtimes. My Avi's in those sorts of games barely represent aspects of me; I find it easy expressing myself because I choose the game and avi. Each game offers something different. In RPSs WoW and Everquest players complete quests, tasks created/overtake

villages and safe places. I learn about teamwork, problem solving and staying focused on a task. Whether I am gay or straight is not a point of discussion in games I play. Playing gives me confidence to share with other close team members. In first life, as an athlete, sports gave me confidence; as a musician, music brought me serenity. Though both gave me inner strength, neither afforded me agency to live *out*. In my first life I was stranded between my own fear of living out as lesbian and a fear of social rules society imposed on me by society. My avi's in online games and Second Life did. My struggle with coming out and living openly is a disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 1993, 2000). I searched ways of living under the *gaydar* (being perceived as LGBTQ) but keeping my self-worth as lesbian intact. Second Life especially was different, there I learned about living as gay, something that did not occur during other game play. I doubt if I would have ever attempted graduate work had I not been heavily involved with online activities; games, chat rooms, and Second Life.

Substantial use of time online needs no defense. By the time I entered graduate school in 2007 I spent nearly ten hours a day online. Chat groups, online courses, learning management systems like Desire To Learn (D2L), Angel and social media were no longer liminal and reserved for a select few. Such platforms were accepted practice in education and business. Whether users were exploring chat rooms, board rooms or school rooms, Internet use including virtual world gaming was salient for gamers, educators, students, business, and homemakers. Everquest players averaged 20 hours a week and players in other games were buying, selling and bartering with online and real world money (Williams et al., 2008; Yee, 2005, 2006a). There are millions of consumers living in the virtual spending real money for the experience, caught up in a virtual capitalism

and the expanse of the entertainment industry (Castronova, 2005; Williams, 2005). Early game markets targeted male adolescents with a propensity toward first person shooter games. Gaming literature shows that today's games no longer target adolescents reporting a population of adults equal to teen players (Castronova, 2005; Castronova et al., 2009; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Nardi, 2010; Vézina, IsaBelle, Fournier, Dufresne, & Doucet, 2004; Yee, 2006a).

My earlier doctoral courses in education and educational technology focused on technology courses and literature about designing online games, educational game learning and game design influence on learning. I read about human computer interaction and cognition (Durso & Nickerson, 2007), then good and bad design models (Norman, 2013). The coursework piqued my interest in learning with and through avatars. I read study after study about demographics, gender, addiction, community, embodiment, design, geography and a score of other topics related to avatars. Each article discussed the game as a place where the study was completed or the avatar as an object of play. Few articles discussed avatars as an extension of identity and none discussed avatar as place of learning. My avatar had been my teacher: Would others benefit from my experience?

* * *

I have no internet connection, and now I'm late! Hurrying to dress, I think to myself that I'm glad I'm not meeting anyone tonight. I just need time to myself. I don't feel the sick-to-my-stomach feeling anticipating my aloneness. In my first life, I feel shy and self-conscious going to public venues alone. RS is not shy. I think how RS has taught me to feel good in my own skin in SL and in my first life. Tonight I will sit and enjoy the concert, maybe do a-bit-of people

watching and eavesdropping. We pick out a favorite outfit, do a quick hair modification, and resize a new ring then teleport over to the concert. There are folks moving about, socializing, some chatting, others dancing to the background music of the group playing tonight. I pan across the screen looking for a familiar profile bubble (an avi's name in a conversation balloon above their head) of acquaintances. SL offers opportunities to represent or misrepresent myself differently across many social categories.

* * *

Yee demonstrated that many players and their self-representations reflect stereotypical social conformity and that visual characteristics of avatars can alter behaviors of individuals. He named this phenomenon "The Proteus Effect" after the Greek sea god who was able to change shape (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). The change occurs because the player gains knowledge of other users and then associates avatar representations to acceptable player behaviors (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Additional research shows a propensity for the notion of stereotypical lift to exist in virtual groups suggesting that we may participate and act out social conventions (social norms) in virtual group settings (Blinka, 2008; Denise, 2013; Evans, 2011; Froomkin & Bradley, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003a; Kolo & Baur, 2004; J.-E. R. Lee, Nass, & Bailenson, 2014; Lin & Wang, 2014; Morley, 2001; Peachey & Childs, 2011; Schultze & Leahy, 2009; Taylor, 2002; Turkle, 1984; Verhagen et al., 2012; Vézina et al., 2004; Webb, 2001; Whang & Chang, 2004; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al., 2007).

My various self-representations shape my social identity in SL. RS can't figure out if she wants anonymity tonight. I stare at RS looking about the auditorium thinking

about her and our relationship. I feel good when I am with RS. She enables me to associate with others on a different plane, a plane where my actions and reactions bring with them learning. She has taught me much about myself, helping me realize my fears, giving me a place to overcome them without harm. I feel good about myself in this created fluid reality, through her eyes seeing me in her and apart from her. It's a feeling I've synthesized in my first life too.

Exploring A Corner of the Metaverse: Designed Shared Spaces

In what relation do humans stand within the Metaverse as a whole?

Humans do not form a separate group apart from Avatars.

In fact, humans are Avatars. Humans do not have any interests apart from—or rights divisible from—the Avatar. The world the Avatar now inhabits is the world the human will soon inhabit.

Each manifestation of the being—human—Avatar—spaceship or other virtual representation will have the same interests unless voluntarily constrained within a known game reality.

Montagne, 2007, p. 23

Virtual worlds, MMORPGs, and RPGs are unique and different but similar in structure and features. Immersive Virtual Worlds such as Quest games and one-person shooter games are similar in structure because the games are as win/lose games (quest completions, levels, challenges). In contrast, and what I value in a technology some argue is fading in relevance for educational technologies, is virtual worlds like Second Life that are immersive environments that designers broadly control, but users create through interactions with the environment for reasons other than win/lose, quests or challenges.

Second Life type games offer greater design freedoms to players. Through my player experiences, virtual worlds offer a sense of community and belonging by design (Schroeder, 2012; Shultz & Leahy, 2009; Taylor, 2002; 2003; 2004).

Malaby's (2011) book based on his ethnographic research described Second Life through the eyes of Linden employees (Lindens). Linden never expected that the game fashioned and born in a University of California dorm room would eventually become a solid company surpassing a 6 million player enrollment. Though co-creative by design, SL takes on a certain "gameness" associated with more traditional formats like quest games and first-person shooter games. For non-gamers and naysayers, SL is play in the sense of its status as not work, essentially pushing SL into a domain of make-believe and intrinsically set apart from everyday life. The game is designed and owned by Linden Labs. Linden's intentional limitations and game design controls make the SL player experience one of living in a place or visiting a place. Thought of as open code (much of the world is unscripted), Second Life offer players role-playing opportunities, places to meet people, explore, play, create buildings, vehicles, do business, even have cybersex if they feel so inclined. Philip Linden, a pseudonym for Phillip Rosedale, the founder of SL, designed SL without game goals positioning it as a creative environment. As of 2014, at least 169 educational institutions maintain private and public learning sites in SL such as Vassar's virtual Sistine Chapel (Secondlife.com, 2014). Vassar created the Second Life demonstration project (which took two months to design) in 2007 to introduce faculty to the power of Second Life as a learning genre. More than 3000 people visited it in the first week (Vassar, 2007). Public entities such as the San Francisco Exploratorium maintains

an interactive science island. It is a place where users spend the time to explore rather than compete.

Lindens profess open design; however, game designers control programming code thus forming game design rules. SL users create objects, textures, texts to meet their needs but only as much as allowed and envisioned by the producers of the game or code designers. Game design elements; affordances, constraints, and conventions allow, force, and restrict players to choose particular corporeal elements. I found alternatives within the SL community that aided me in my avatar creation and acceptance of her. A recurring theme in much of the SL literature celebrates SL lands as open, liberating, freeing atmospheres. Gamers can easily accomplish gender swapping, playing in a different gendered character from oneself (Hussain, Griffiths, 2008), by selecting a checkbox with the click of the mouse.

Creative SL users profit in physical world currency designing and marketing gender enhancing, and gender-bending designs often fooling the codes that require gendered bodies. de Certeau (1984) would call actions such as fooling codes or undermining designers' intent, tactics. The view of the designers, those who actually control the game's infrastructure, and those who ultimately have controlling power may be viewed differently by users or groups of users. de Certeau posits strategies and tactics as devices that institutions (power structures) and individuals employ to control and recreate everyday life. In SL, I use a stock avatar and customize it using what SL coders offer including those who used the same opportunity to create and sell skins.

Every day practices are vast collections of procedures, which include operations and technical manipulations. Daily life is reinvented through the (re)appropriations of

property and knowledge (de Certeau, 1984). Tactics are the tools used by individuals and groups to create the innumerable transformation and representations of knowledge.

Subversion results when the tactics of the powerless use the resources of power. Second Life is free and users are able to create/recreate elements of the designers “de Certeau’s City” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93). Life reinvents itself by endless (re)appropriations of the others’ property. In the case of SL, users are able to use artifacts refashioning them to meet user needs. Those forced or who choose to play structured games in their first life controlled by the institutional power of capitalism’s market rules and designers, find alternatives in SL worlds created with a multitude of variation. In SL, those feeling marginalized by code restrictions or cultural constraints, consume the culture of the dominant power; in this case, Linden then facilitates change in the game’s design. They accomplish this by ‘making do’ with products of the dominant system. I found in SL that gender specificity was problematic to those who must subscribe to the will of the code, non-specific gender persons, and LGBTQ persons. Personally designing and wearing skins was one way of subverting Linden designer’s gender code.

de Certeau describes “making do” (bricolage) as “using and reusing bits and pieces to recompose a thing, place or space” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xv). How one in their corporeal world cooks, or makes meaning from reading a book, or goes about their daily lives are tactics of everyday living, devices used to adapt in the face of power. How I set up my living space and body in SL are my online devices. According to de Certeau, “everyday ways” lack their own ideology. In other words, tactics must conform in some way to institutional rules. Thus, logic exists among practices concealed within the tactics. Tactics’ actions do not set out to destroy, take over, or claim space; instead, they await

opportunities. Tactics rely on the space of the Other (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). According to de Certeau, tactics count coup and do not keep what it wins (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Generally speaking, ways of operating day-to-day is a learning experience about negotiating imposed limits. I read and make meaning of a book that differs from the author's intent. I use my company computer to search the Internet on company time. I change my female-looking avatar in SL utilizing male skins. I thus negotiate imposed limitations, subverting hegemonic power in a cunning way, much like the Greek's Métis, as in "a hunter's cunning" or a way of getting away with something (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). For what I need, I negotiate Linden's restrictions with another's designer body.

Nardi (2010), spent years in WoW as a "Night Elf Priest" studying the intersections of culture, gender, and behavior (Nardi, 2010). She investigated how gamers adopt and adapt technology to their needs. She found that contexts in which users work/play is paramount to game design because if designers fail to please, the game fails to sell. Culture and context changes with time (Hall, 1983). System designs based on an interactive user interface and user relationships with other users is valuable to HCI (Human Computer Interaction) researchers attempting to understand how players learn (Nardi, 1996b). McGonigal (2010) highlights group dynamics and problem-solving skills that Guilders (user formed team players) learn in WoW.

Studies previously noted suggest student interactions with computer games can have relevance beyond simple entertainment. McGonigal posits learning about how to act like a hero makes better-quality physical world citizens. As a player living in "the place of hero," a player takes what they have learned in that place and transfers the learning back to their cognitive self, in a physical world place. Lee's research revealed using

avatars in social-group settings nurtured cultural skill building (Lee, E-K, 2004). Jon Cabiria's work with LGBTQ persons in SL concluded that the sense of belonging and connectedness in avatar relationships lead to higher player self-esteem and a sense of well-being that crossed over to players physical world (Cabiria, 2008).

CHAPTER II

PLACE IN CONTEXT: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON AVATARS

Research conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) on youth who self-identify as not *fitting in* in their physical world classrooms due to gender, race, learning disability, sexuality, and other characteristics find themselves ostracized from their social groups (Gulemetova, Drury, & Bradshaw, 2011). Youth and adults who do not *fit in* are often targets of peer-taunting, bullying, physical violence and death (Gulemetova, Drury, & Bradshaw, 2011). In addition, research shows youth who endure these experiences have lower academic outcomes, higher rates of absenteeism, depression, and suicide when compared to similar non-marginalized students (Gulemetova, Drury, & Bradshaw, 2011). In addition to physical world research on marginalized youth, online (Internet) research (Cabiria, 2007) demonstrates that avatar-human integration in virtual worlds creates meaningful experiences, learning experiences that transfer to real world activities. Additionally, my own work in SL reflects that SL can be a living laboratory integrating the human with the avatar, a place where one safely practices gender swapping and identity experimentation. This sort of integration raises the question of how virtual world identities might influence perceptions of self in physical world classrooms.

Marginalized youth (those in jeopardy of dropping out of school, targets of bullying, with a rate of suicide higher than their counterparts) are faced with maintaining hegemonic status quo in the real world. Turkle (1994) asserts that virtual space allows participants, independent of any age group, to work out real world issues through self-exploration. Games designed without avatar body affordances are restrictive to all players but especially to those who play to relieve the stress of their real world lives. Such game navigation constraints might be thought of as cognitive stressors. According to Cabiria (2008), virtual world experience reversed notions of physical world reality and virtual worlds fantasy noting participants felt more real in Second Life (an online community) and fake in their physical world spaces. The 2010 National Education Technology Plan (NETP) calls for technologies in schools in order to make America's students problem solvers (Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Virtual communities and worlds clearly have the potential to meet that challenge, but in order to be successful design must offer interactive spaces that meet the emotional, cognitive, physical and psycho-social needs of the players (Andreas, Tsiatsos, Terzidou, & Pomportsis, 2010; Bronack et al., 2008; Clark & Maher, 2001, 2003; Dickey, 2005; Falloon, 2010; Gee, 2007; Gregg et al., 2012; Minocha & Reeves, 2010; Peter, Beale, Crane, & Axelrod, 2007; Peter, Crane, Fabri, Agius, & Axelrod, 2008; Wheeler, 2009).

Evidence supporting psychological development through identity formation in and out of virtual worlds is plentiful (Boellstorff, 2008a; Goffman, 2002; Mead & Strauss, 1956; Taylor, 2004; Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Virtual spaces offer spaces where players have opportunities to explore identities in virtual world experiences, make

community connections in Virtual Worlds such as Second Life, or explore fantasy as online game players (gamers). Cognitive psychology work in HCI demonstrates virtual worlds, computer stand-alone video games, and online video games are learning spaces (Gee, 2003; Hartson, 2003; Nardi, 1996a; Turkle, 2011). As such, virtual worlds offer opportunities to empower; however, researchers have not yet determined to what degree and duration and in which circumstances participants find such spaces empowering. Activity from within socially constructed spaces appears normal to those residing in that particular space. Users live in their online worlds. To those outside looking in, the same activities may look strange or perverse (Cabiria, 2008; Hartson, 2003).

* * *

No interviews today. RS quickly changes clothes then teleports to one of my favorite bars for a bit of respite. Fun Mary's [pseudonym] place is abuzz with holiday preparations. The loud speaker is blasting out "Hey BAD Girls, come over and hang out with me while I DJ my set for BRIDGE RADIO FX!! Today I am taking us back in time to some 60s, 70s, and early 80s tunes!" Words begin to appear in the little box at the bottom of my screen used for text conversation with others.

Folks are chatting and exchanging hellos discussing the recent changes to the male rules. M offers F a valium, and they head down to the dance floor. In this place we are all lesbian women hanging out, dancing. RS chats with friends from the UK, Europe, Pennsylvania and California. L is waking up in her First Life, I am finishing dinner and M is waiting for her husband and children to come home from work and school, and F is on her lunch break. The conversation turns serious than jovial as we discuss the bar's reopening with a new look, and SL's

new gender rules. As always in this bar, the mood sways between serious and frivolous. Several conversations are active when I (RS) arrive (F/MB&ZA).

As RS and I arrive at our location, RS asks about the recent gender requirements that are to ensure a female only venue is maintained by the owners of the bar.

ZA: resends her copy of the note to both RS and MB as more people enter the venue. The discussion among the avatars is how will we really know female. One person suggests a mic test to hear the voice; another jokingly suggests panty checking (NOTE: unless one purchases below the waist genitals, none is offered in stock body parts). The conversation switches to the recently updated décor and free T shirts. RS continues her conversation about her experiences with trying to get in the bar the day before. The location was locked, and RS kept landing in a snow covered section of SL often landing on top of an igloo. As this discussion ends, several of the avatars head off to other SL places.

Others gather at the bar each typing as they begin chatting. First on the scene is BS then Ms.

BS: Hiya.

Ms: Hey B.

RS focuses on one conversation with F.

F: How are we going to weed the real guys out? The mic test is only way I know.

RS: Thanks.

F: Oh wait I think it said personal invite.

RS: So are we getting invited? Or are we in?

F: Think we are in if already here.

RS: Okay, you know how out in left field I can be sometimes, LOL.

F: I will offer myself up as the "checker of panties" at the door.

RS: Too funny

F: Wow, it's really changed!

F: This place, it's more open. Looks nice. Okay, I didn't get tossed out, so I think our tags still work.

F: Off to shop!

F: Later girls.

RS walks over to her favorite chair, sits down and watches while other dance to the music. Her first life body is computing the stimuli of watching, listening and feeling the moment.

* * *

The human brain is like a computer. We think of the brain in terms of electrical circuits, filled with bits of information, running on programs with long and short term memory, and programmable. We compare computers in terms of its neurons and pathways, its electrical stimuli and output circuits as an embodiment of our mind, no longer a tool but an extension of ourselves, a second self (Turkle, 1984). Turkle once envisioned the computer as our 'second self' where we could catch a glimpse of an image of ourselves in the mirror of the computer screen (Turkle, 1984, 1994, 2011). Today's

computers and peripherals allow us the perspective that we can step beyond the mirror, to actively engage in and through the screen. In the 1990s computing was on the cusp of the “P” in PC on the path of brave new adventures, online networking, and virtual gaming. Two decades later interactive virtual world places offer community to millions of users challenging the way we think about identity, sexuality, and culture (Turkle, 2011). It is obvious that we are connected to and influenced by technology both alone and in community; sense of place/spirit of place adds a dimension to theory about physical place offering users the dimension of the self in place and the sense of being in two places at once—powerful tools for understanding how we construct our identity (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001; Clark & Maher, 2003; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Escobar, 2001; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Massey, 1991; Morley, 2001; Relph, 1976, 2007; Shamsuddin & Ujang, 2008; Slater, 2009)

Avatars are not metaphoric, mine represent me on a number of levels. In SL avatars conjure up a sense of presence and a sense of being as they move about in and among digital creations (worlds, homes, museums, shore resorts, shopping malls, churches, theaters, universities, etc.). Additionally, user avatars are given URLs; addresses that show the location of avatars in Second Life or, avatars as existing *in place* or as unique places. Avatars may be two or three dimensional, used in games or in online communities, social networks or simply as a digital handle or screen name for a user (Daintith & Wright, 2012; Fairfax, 2012; Ince, 2012, TechTerms; 2009). Ultimately, avatars are potentially a type of place that bridge borders between physical place and virtual space-places (games, virtual worlds, URLs, etc.).

The concept of community brings a sense of belonging to social groups in face-to-face physical settings and participation in community strengthens a sense of self (Thomas, 2009). Communities considered as bounded places establish themselves by inclusive memberships offering perceived emotional safety and security and a sense of belongingness within the group (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). This sense of belonging is constructed and manipulated by users in Second Life (Wahlstedt et al., 2008). Outcomes and depends on an active community of learners. Constructed identities like physical world identities are a means for including or excluding people from groups. Unlike physical world identity, virtual world identity can adapt quickly offering possibilities for rapid revisions and manipulation of avatar bodies that changes levels of belongingness (Thomas, 2009).

Arguments abound for the benefits or dangers of technologies. As one example, I was moving from my dorm room to my first off campus apartment. My age allowed me to rent in a faculty/student housing complex of a dozen or so two story red brick four unit complexes bordering a public golf course. My place was on the first floor just off the second fairway. The newly invented microwave oven was all the rage. Taken in by the wonderment of new technology which I inherited from both my parents and my own youthful consumerism, I decided to purchase one. My proud announcement rendered me speechless when my aunt began sending me grocery store checkout line news clippings. I remember one horror story of a fetus being cooked inside the womb from its mother standing too close while cooking! Media technology has had its share of naysayers as well. A respected Swiss scientist, Conrad Gessner, known as the father of the bibliography, was purported to have sounded an alarm about the effects of information overload during the era in which he lived. He described how the modern world overwhelmed people with data

which was "confusing and harmful" to the mind. He died in 1565, and his warnings focused on the newly introduced printing press (Wellisch, 1975).

Like all technologies, virtual worlds and their Avatars are places for positive and negative emotional and psychological effects. Research suggests that a hierarchy of needs from the physical world crosses over into virtual worlds (Barnes & Pressey, 2011).

Second Life embodied identities are performative, moving through fantasies with blurred boundaries. Users design avatar bodies, act out personae expressing themselves through technology. Avatar identity can be an accurate representation of whom we think we are in our physical world or our fantasy self. In other ways, avatars might embody the representation of the ideal self or worst possible self.

CHAPTER III

STORYING THE LITERATURE OF AVATAR INTERSECTIONS

A life without places is as unimaginable as a life without other people. We all were born, live and will die in towns, neighborhoods, villages or cities that have names and which are filled with memories, associations and meanings. Places are so completely taken for granted that they need no definition. They are the complex, obvious contexts of daily life, filled with buildings, cars, relatives, plants, smells, sounds, friends, strangers, obligations and possibilities.

Relp, 2007, p. 12

The Meaning of Place

We make meaning of our world through our experiences in and with our world. Literature exploring the meaning of place in postmodernism crisscrosses the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, education, geography and psychology (Agnew, 1989; Bergthaller, 2012; Casey, 1997; Cresswell, 1996, 2004; de Certeau, 1984; Dentzau, 2014;

Foucault, 1979, 1984; Latour & Hermant, 2006; Malpas, 1999; Massey, 1991; Relph, 1976; Soja, 1989; Tuan, 1977; Worley, 2006; Zekos, 2007). Most often in discussion of place, sense of place, placeness, or placenessness, the concept of place often incorporates social elements, geo-physical locations, locale, landscape, and state of mind (Agnew, 1987, 1989; Bishop, 2008; Casey, 1997; Jones, 2006; Malpas, 1999; Massey, 1991; McDowell, 1999; Morley, 2001; Paiva, 2014; Relph, 1976; Wellman, 2001).

Doreen Massey contends places do not possess clear boundaries. They are not single entities but fluid processes with multiple identities (Massey, 1991). Casey (1993) and Relph (1976) focus much of their work on sensations of place. Casey notes the concept of place as extensions of one's body while Relph defines a number of different types of places each offering unique experiences (Champion, 2010). Virtual communities have distinct ties to concepts of place (Champion, 2010) and evoke new senses of place. Virtual worlds have features that are found in place discourse: Distinct themes, atmospheres, contextually related artifacts, the capacity to overawe, power to evoke memory, transmit cultural intentions (individual and socially constructed bodies) and offers a framework for individual/communal activity (Champion, 2010, p. 29).

The everydayness and personal creations of place make defining a single concept such as virtual place impracticable if not impossible. The Canadian geographer Edward Relph examined concepts of place and placenessness. Relph's early work on place identifies three key components: physical setting, activities, and meaning making. He argues that place is a fundamental aspect of human existence. Places are a fusing of nature with humanity, giving humans a sense of the world around them. From a phenomenological and existential lens, humans experience place as authentic, direct, and

genuine or inauthentic, mediated, and distorted by arbitrary social or stereotyped conventions. The latter describes a *sense* of place rather than place. Modernism through technology and media create standardizations and landscape designs insensitive toward authentic places or surroundings, creating changed attitudes and thinking about places. The effect of Modernism's uncritical acceptance of mass values on place is placenessness (Relph, 1976). Positing postmodern thought poses a serious difficulty for what he calls "authentic" place making. Relph delineates what he determines as "real" from virtual place arguing that virtual and other mediated spaces are changing real place somehow making what we feel in virtual worlds inauthentic. Relph denies "the virtual" as authentic place arguing that "the virtual" is an identity of a spirit or sense of place rather than a substitution of his notion of physical place. He moves beyond print and art form media noting it as imaginary place building. MMORPGs differ from other media. In virtual worlds participants are sensually and imaginatively immersed (Relph, 2007, p. 31). Relph concludes that virtual place for some will become dysfunctional, for others, it will add to current sense of "real" place (Relph, 2007, p. 32).

Virtual worlds are accepted as places (Adams, 1997; Clark & Maher, 2003; Escobar, 2001; Hutchison, 2007; Jones, 2006; Morley, 2001; Paiva, 2014). Places have the power to influence, a phenomenon obvious to anyone knowing a person who comes from a place of being oppressed, enslaved, beaten, or hurt in another way. What about places that make us feel safe, accepted, or good about who we are? Place has educative meaning; what we learn in one place can carry with us to other places. We may grow as a person after spending time in places. Change happens at times consciously, at other times unconsciously. What if we could create avatars for educational reasons that allow

students who otherwise feel marginalized to experience another place in school: an avatar-place in a virtual world?

Discourse about place and bodies as places long precedes my current project. The Cartesian notion of the mind in a body suggests that the mind, the place of all knowing is expressed through and acted on and upon a bio-mechanical body. The *Holy Bible* and theologians extend that notion by a discussion of the soul, the body as a temple of the soul, the center of spirituality. As a product of Catholic Schooling, my *female modesty* is a direct teaching of the idea of the Holy Spirit living in me, in that spiritual place, my soul. We hear about body art and the body as place of art. We watch TV shows dedicated to Tattooing competitions. There are museum exhibits where corpses have been turned into artwork and teaching tools posed in displays of human physiology. There is little question that cultural meanings are attached to the body as a place of disease or a nursing mother as a place of love. Donna Haraway's cyborg sees the body and technology as interconnected positing that we are joined with our technology in a repetition and reproductive way. We are cyborgs, hybrids imagined in our minds, built by our hands then interwoven in us. We become our technology and in turn, our technology shapes us. Whether political, mechanical, or social, we invent the technology; it merges with us to create a means and method with a body-place of reinvention. There are millions of people represented in online environments known only by their screen names, icons or avatars. We are decoupled from any physical form, yet we possess identity. Who are you when you use social media or that picture of you on your phone? Technology makes my identity malleable; I can reinvent myself with the click of a mouse or a swish of a finger.

Moving About in Places

It is Monday afternoon; I am in place as a graduate teaching assistance some thirty plus years since I left full time teaching. I load up a couple of those canvas book bags one receives at conferences with materials for my upcoming class then head out the door. It is that time in the semester when students are writing their first solo lesson plan. The upcoming class has a broad content area. The students find this particular course overwhelming. A longer than usual prep time is allotted this semester. There are twenty-three students in this section which, by college standards, is considered overload for Teaching Assistants. For some reason, the college combined an undergraduate class with a graduate class drawing from several disciplines outside of Education. The graduate students are preparing to teach and need to fulfill several pre-service classes to satisfy their student teaching requirements for State Certification. In the undergraduate group, I have students preparing for a variety of subjects: art, foreign languages, math, science, social studies, and English. This multiplicity of topics is spread across levels, ranging from middle school to high school. The graduate students are clustered in high school courses in English, biology, and art. I defer to travel via elevator today; I'm just too overloaded with materials and lesson plan examples to safely navigate stairs to a basement classroom.

My course section meets one day a week for three hours. Undergraduates may like the idea of one class per week, but they often think that one day per week somehow equates to a lesser workload than three days a week courses. I find myself moving students through required work at a pace that frequently leaves them confused. We have an online site for accessing assignments, readings, and personalized assistance. This is

their first teaching course. It is rigorous and offers little opportunity to procrastinate. The course is intended as an introduction to teaching and includes a practicum component where students are expected to complete two classroom service experiences; one in junior high and one in high school. Units, lesson plans, theories of teaching, and class management are some of the topics students learn to master. For the majority of students, it gets overwhelming at times. I attempted to overcome some of their confusion and reduce their stress by rearranging assignments and allowing group work. Students worked in groups. The groups could stay in the classroom or go to the resource room, or computer lab. The graduate students and a single undergraduate group chose to stay.

I exit the elevator and head down a long hallway toward the classroom. I notice one of my students working at a table along the wall near the vending machine area. Her head is down as if she is reading but her hands, with fingers spread, are up under her hair and over her ears. As I walk past her, I bend slightly to greet her with a smile. She looks up and beckons me to sit in an open chair. She says she is frustrated because she could not understand last week's assignment. I'm thinking to myself, "This is Monday, seven days after we discussed the assignment with a demonstration and handouts." I smile and ask if she had emailed me because I had not seen a note, or maybe she had stopped by my office? I'm there daily, but maybe I missed her. She had made no attempts at contacting me. I tell her not to worry; we'd work it out in class. I continue down the hallway.

Several students ask about last week's assignment. I already feel my class plan unraveling. In the back of my mind, I'm thinking they did not meet as planned and simply took off last week after class. I settle everyone down with a, "Let's talk as a group inside." I walk over to my door to unlock it. The students have all lined up behind me as

if we were getting ready for a parade. My classroom is a science lab with tables set in large squares allowing for group interaction. The space is wonderful for this type of course although it is a room that several professors share and today it is a mess. I quickly boot the computer, sign on, hastily tidy up the tables, and then return to the front fielding and answering questions. This day started as a just another Monday, moved into a tailspin, then ends in a crash and burn day. After class had ended, I made the long drive home reflecting on the day. Is the course I am teaching a learning opportunity or a way of indoctrinating a new version of old teaching methods into the heads of a new generation of teachers? All learning has a moment where we are out of balance while we make sense of the new material. I questioned what I was teaching and what my students were learning. Weary and exhausted I made my way home. I decided to put my First Life day behind. Once at home, I brew fresh coffee, change clothes then head out to my SL home; in my avatar-place, I will reflect on the events of today, my teaching, my students and the learning that transpired. What could I have done better?

My doctoral coursework in Educational Technology required that I take courses in design. Coursework included discussions about computer learning, learner needs, and cognition; Dewey, Heidegger, Lave, Piaget, Vygotsky, etc. Embodied cognition is a theory that is a response and in some cases an alternative to cognitive/classical views (Cowart, 2015). It emphasizes the formative role environment plays in the development of cognitive processes and learning outcomes (Cowart; 2015). The key point is that embodied cognition posits that the mind, body and world mutually interact and influence each other promoting an organism's adaptive success (Cowart, 2015). There are assumptions that will help the reader understand. My avatar(s) embodies identity. She is a

multifaceted home for my identity in another plane of existence, a virtual world place where I go to learn about the parts of me I hide from the world.

Place theory outlines fundamental aspects defining place. Agnew, a political geographer, is straightforward in his theorizing. He defines place as having location, locale and what he suggests is a *sense of place*, the feeling of being there in opposition to here (Agnew, 2011). Location is simply a set of fixed coordinates such as latitude and longitude or set locations of an object to one another; an island to a shoreline, the moon in relation to the earth, my garage as an attachment to my home. Locale is a material setting for social relations, the actual shape of the place where people gather, whether real or imaginary, or a weaving internal and external (Agnew, 1992; Cresswell, 2008). The concept, Sense of Place, the feeling of being there, is a local structure of feeling (Agnew, 1993) that speaks to my virtual world experiences and my subjective emotional attachment to my avatar. The importance of Agnew's theory of place encompasses the very notion that place is not a thing but a view of the world leading to a personal understanding of elements of the world. My understanding, my location in the world, my identity formulating my experiences and acting on me. My avatar is an extension of an actual world body and mind—or, at the very least a facet, image, or idea of me. The avatar as my creation, as my alter-ego, my dream or imagination is place. My avatar is place and from that placeness, I experience and learn. I am part of my technology.

Players number in the multi-millions globally and continue to increase annually. Games may suit a certain player, but there is no such description for an average player. Players join games for different reasons employing different identities in each game depending on the underlying game structure. When I am a bovine giant whose role is to

be advisor I am very different from the knight I play in a game where I am a leader destroying dragons, or when I'm kicked back in SL listening to a concert. Though games dictate how I adjust my identity to fit my character, an avatar is the greatest single commonality across my varied game play. How I experience my identity in each avatar-place teaches me about facets of my identity. She intensifies those parts of my culture I wish to experience. I learn through game participation and personal assessment of my choices and actions. Avatars are places. They have location, power to evoke memory; they transmit cultural intentions (individual and social bodies) they are in community with others. They offer a sense of there-ness, of me being "there, in my avatar."

CHAPTER IV

AVATAR AS PLACE OF EDUCATION: A PLATFORM FOR LEARNING

Affordances and Constraints

Affordance and constraint in Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and game design are relevant to virtual worlds design. They are at the heart of Norman's notion of "good" design; learning environments, emotions, motivation, and usability. Affordances and constraints directly influence knowledge construction. Affordances, in particular, shift the conventional process of participants' learning from passively receiving knowledge to actively constructing knowledge. Two important theorists underpin affordance theory, James J. Gibson a psychologist, and Don (Donald) Norman, a design expert. Gibson introduced his theory of affordances in 1977 (Norman, 2012). In understanding how visual interpretation influences learning, Gibson refers to "actionable properties" (Norman, 2012) between an environment and an actor (animal/ human). He suggests that people's perceptions of their environments guide their actions.

Affordances consist of visible or invisible environmental clues. Gibson's intention is that an affordance is an action possibility independent of one's ability to perceive the possibility (Soeegard, 2008). Those who are marginalized by society need not perceive the avatar as an affordance for it to function as an affordance. Norman's theory extends Gibson's to include

perceived and *actual* (fundamental) properties of a thing where an individual could determine its use without instruction. Affordance is a relationship between what is actual (exists) and what the user perceives. According to Norman, his concept might be better thought of as “perceived affordances” (Norman, 2012). Affordances reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects (Norman, 1999). Norman’s “perceived” affordances reflect the importance of considering the socio-cultural context of game design and envisioning other values about beauty, age, race, and gendered and sexed bodies than those we hold in North America.

Game designers must consider what the user perceives and needs as much as what the user can consciously determine in a game (Antonenko, Dawson, & Shilpa, 2015). A designer adds graphical affordances that give players a sense of touching rather than a response to touch. The user, in turn, uses computer devices such as a mouse or other pointing device to touch (Norman, 1999). Norman’s premise is underpinned by the belief that affordances result from prior knowledge, experiential learning and mental interpretation. In Norman’s view, affordances exist outside of any relationship with an organism. Gibson’s affordance only exists in relation to an organism; it is user-centric in that affordances are properties in a material world and exist when organisms actively live in environments.

* * *

My mind is wandering, what an ordeal. The intruder terrorized me. I couldn’t sleep for two nights. I kept thinking about how I could have prevented the intrusion or if my reporting it to Linden would stop it. Kay was helpful. I’m glad she instructed me in security affordances. Unfortunately, for me they were

not obvious, I'd never seen that part of the menu options. I remember seeing the curtains and doors open and close, lights come on and off, when I would mouse over and arm point. I don't remember noticing security options that prevented people from walking through the walls or ceilings. Did I miss something reading it somewhere? I could kick myself; I was too busy creating myself to notice them I guess. I know about them now. Even more importantly I know how to use them to prevent intruders in my home. All I can think about is getting out of the house for a while. I remember seeing a note about the International Space Station and one about the Yamato² museum. I also wanted to see the new psych simulation walking through a hospital while in the mind of a schizophrenic. It's interactive; I'll start my trek there.

* * *

Avatar Intersections

“an artifact pushed far enough tends to reincorporate the user”

McLuhan & Powers, 1989, p. 3

Why is this information about the choices and affordances in SL important to consider as part of this autoethnographic work? As part of my broader investigation into a self-in-culture? We have a relationship with our technology, a relationship described by

² Japan's Aircraft Carrier from which the attack on Pearl Harbor was launched on 12/7/1940.

McLuhan and Powers as a four-fold pattern of transformation, “tetrad metaphor.” The concept is a theoretical model for assessing, analyzing and predicting the social effects of technology on society (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). The metaphor is a tool for discussing effects in the human/technology relationship or the effect particular technologies have on society. As a cognitive model, it is used to refine, focus, and discover unknown and unobserved entities in cultures and technologies (McLuhan & Powers, 1989, p. 128).

“Avatar” is neither a computer-generation creation nor term but a Hindu deity who descends to earth or an earthly being descended from a deity (Fairfax, 2012; OED, 2013; Webster, 2012). In Hinduism, the incarnation takes on human or animal form sent by the god Vishnu to counteract a particular evil in the world (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2013). Thus, the basic, generic definition for “avatar” is one who descends from the heavens and crosses over from deity to earthly form (OED, 2013).

The design concept behind a virtual world avatar draws upon its Hindu roots, for its human creator (deity) “crosses over” this time from the physical world to the virtual one rather than from the heavens to the earthly world. The avatar is the incarnation in the virtual world of its human creator-user. Virtual avatars may be two or three dimensional, used in games or in online communities, social networks, or simply as digital handles or screen names for a user (Christensson, 2009).

Although many conceptualize avatars as extensions of the user, contending that computer avatars ironically or graphically represent the user, it is necessary to remember that one constructs virtual world game avatars within the virtual world game’s design constraints—just as the Hindu deity constructs his earthly incarnation and humans construct their physical world selves within the confines of scientific laws and physical

bodies. Within these constraints, the human gamer/user who “creates the avatar in any particular virtual world game imbeds the user’s potential to fulfill his/her desires and aspirations into the avatar” (Gee, 2007, pp. 50–53). Thus in a MMORPG or virtual world player avatars are simply an interactive projection the user has created. To participate in the virtual world, SL, human users or “players” essentially assemble avatars copying and pasting some of their unique human qualities into their avatars. By virtue of the fact that human users or players have assembled their avatars, each avatar depicts facets of its creator/assembler, but only those allowed within the game’s design constraints.

Within the constraints of SL, my avatar becomes the place I have made, the place I have chosen to be, and the place that teaches what I have decided to learn by the way I have assembled my avatar place. With a few short mouse clicks, it is possible to change the looks, gender, and other characteristics of my avatar-place. In virtual worlds, players may create/assemble each avatar-place within each online venue so its user-assembler/creator explores, experiments, and satisfies his/her curiosity in ways that may be impossible in the physical world in a physical world form.

Teaching, Culture and Successful Teaching Outcomes

*“The essence of place lies in the largely
unselfconscious intentionality that defines places
as profound centers of human existence.”*

Edward Relph, 1976

Virtual worlds (VWs) exist; they are out “there,” wherever scholars say “there” is. In the autobiographical portion of the *Discourse* (1637) Descartes explains that as a student he followed contemporary educational preparation: He read and studied all that

teachers gave to him. After completing the curriculum successfully, he wrote: “I found myself beset by so many doubts and errors that I came to think I had gained nothing from my attempts to become educated but increasing recognition of my ignorance” (6:4). Like many who identify as marginalized, Descartes’ education failed him too.

* * *

A message is waiting for me when in SL. It is from a friend, Kay, who wants me to drop by her place. I quickly change my clothes then teleport to her new home. Kay [pseudonym] has recently moved into a new house and put in a flower garden. There is a stepping-stone path to her house, bordered by a garden with a wooden bench. The house surrounded by pinks, purple, blue and white flowers planted all along the front and sides comes into view. My mind’s eye sends the sensation of their sweet smell to a moment where I recall how this SL place mirrored homes in my First Life childhood neighborhoods. I pause before moving forward. It is hard to forget childhood pain. Maybe because I cannot reason through the whys but in this SL moment, I smile and remember that there were also good times growing up. I had not seen the inside yet. Her door was open, but Kay was not there. I stood at the door for a moment looking about. Kay is an artist; her creations adorn her home’s walls, corners, and table tops. In one corner is a wooden globe with etched continents and colorful globe markings. Kay arrives. We sit in her living room and visit for a time, then move outside. We sit for another hour visiting about her First Life children. Kay needs to mow her SL lawn, so I walk with her continuing to chat about her First Life

house full of adolescents. Kay is transitioning from male-to-female and lives as a woman in SL. Living her First Life on the West Coast, we meet face-to-face only in SL.

* * *

Kay has been in SL since 2006. She developed her first avatar when she was starting to deal with her gender issues (These are Kay's words; she considers herself transsexual). Kay wanted to see how "female" she was and considered SL to be a place where she could be honest about herself. Her first female avatar (avi) experience was not positive. Her avi wound up being stalked by an abusive lover. A second avi had more of Kay's real world physical features, and she has not changed it drastically since. For Kay, skins are a way to "costume up," a term for making significant but temporary changes to one's avi. Kay found a way to experience what she perceived life would be like to live gendered as female and perceived as a woman. I traveled her path with her for over a year while she moved from designing herself (her avi), then redesigning herself. We often joked about her biological, male view and its influence on her female body. Her first body, as Kay put it, looked like a "Barbie" (in SL this means 'fake'). I later realized that the "Barbies" were usually men masquerading as women. In Kay's case, she was learning and educating herself in her avatar. As Kay learned about being female and a woman in her avi, she began feeling a sense of belonging with her avi. She described a deep, meaningful long term relationship in SL that lasted over five years. In her avatar, Kay had created a safe and comfortable place.

Kay and I follow social conventions and game conventions that often exert influence over our digital bodies much like Descartes' thinking room. The digital bodies

we create in turn influence us (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Yee et al., 2007). As Kay learned her femaleness living in her avatar place and through her own persona, she changed her avatar place in the same way as she redecorated her favorite room moving things around, redoing and at times refurbishing.

Research on emotional experience and transfer to physical world reality has demonstrated that avatars influence their owners (Cabiria, 2011; Lin & Wang, 2014; Martey & Consalvo, 2011; McCue, 2008; Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Peachey & Childs, 2011; Taylor, 2002; Turkle, 1984, 2011; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al., 2007). I asked Kay about positive and negative experiences she had in SL while working through her issues. Aside from the stalking experience, she felt as if her own truthfulness was off-putting to some. In my physical world, only a few close friends knew of her desire to fulfill her transition. In SL, she felt that some folks just did not want to get involved with a transsexual. Kay learned in her avatar place virtual world particular social conventions that she never had considered “placeness” or displacement. She explained how different the male gaze became once she changed to a female avi and how her body seemed out of place with other females.

I am in my physical world with close friends over dinner; we rarely talk about my Lesbian life, and there is no need. I am with friends who know, and I am cautiously at ease. I must always be alert, playing it straight. I learned in my avatar what “being out and totally free” felt like. In her I feel at home; comfortable and content. How others looked at me, how freeing acceptance felt, and how I felt as if I had found my place. I asked my questions from inside my avatar, my safe place, my place of refuge, my place of hope. It was after one such session in SL that I had the courage to openly mention a

relationship with my partner in one of my early doctoral courses. It was an amazing experience just to mention my life, my real life with one who is my deepest love. For years, I've had to introduce her as my friend. When I spoke the words "my partner" the sky did not open, lightening did not strike, and it was not spread all over school the next day. In fact, no one seemed to care at all. It was a wonderful experience, one that I have sparingly repeated.

Place is a point on a continuum; at one end is place at the other space linking experience to abstraction. Place is a complex concept and much literature about what constitutes place traverses a broad multi-disciplinary spectrum (Agnew, 1987, 1989; Cresswell, 1996, 2004; de Certeau, 1984; Domosh & Seager, 2001; Escobar, 2001; Foucault, 1984; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Latour & Hermant, 2006; McDowell, 1999; Relph, 1976, 2007; Rheingold, 1993; Tuan, 1977; Turkle, 1984). A simple definition is that places are spaces made special by people. Places have meaning attached to them by people. More importantly, I consider place not simply a thing but rather a way of understanding the world.

Place is where people exist in the world. People interacting with an environment making meaning, creating emotional attachments making places mine or yours, us or them or, at times, exclusionary—hateful and bigoted, gendered, heterosexist, anatomical. Edward Relph (1976) argues that place is a conscious knowing of where one is in the world. Agnew (1987) outlines place as having three fundamental aspects; location—a settlement, locale—place where events take place, and sense of place—characteristics of a place (Agnew, 1987). Casey (1997) and Malpas (1999) take a view that place is a social construct. Doreen Massey, a feminist geographer (1991) offers new ideas about mobility

and globalization. She posits that place is not bounded or static rather it is a product of processes undermining any particular place(s). Massey describes place as interconnections of routes making hybridizing place as open and fluid. Rooted places erode through globalization and time-space compression. Human geographers study human/environment interaction. Feminist geographers study Human geography through a feminist lens to explore environmental and geographical spaces. Human and Feminist geographers study people, gender, community and culture in relationship to the world.

The concept of place in virtual worlds has become an important topic of discussion in research literature among geographers and place theorists. Designs of and in virtual places raise questions about the meaning of place used to describe physical world environments. Edward Relph (1976) debated a sense of place and a spirit of place in regard to media and virtual reality, while Champion (2002) argued the concept of place purporting that “place is an essential component in designs of successful virtual environments” (Champion, 2002; p. 1). Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created the Changing Places Research Group; the Interactive Institute in Sweden is working to improve interactive environments reflecting cultures of inhabitants; and the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo created multimedia architectural projects. All of these centers research place-making; all have a common focal point, the virtual.

According to Champion (2010), place in virtual communities exists in five major ways: first, place is characterized by a distinct theme, atmosphere and contextually related artifacts; second, it may have the capacity to overawe, as well as, third, evoke memories or associations; fourth, it may act as a state or framework where communal and

individual activity can take place; and finally, it can/must possess the ability to transmit the cultural intentions of individual participants and social “bodies.” I contend that communities constitute place though opinions differ regarding virtual as place. I contend that Avatars offer much if not the same ‘placeness.’ Virtual place research has proven that place, even as illusion, fosters physical world behaviors in virtual worlds (Liao, 2011; McCue, 2008; McGonigal, 2011; Messinger et al., 2008; Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Pearce, 2009; Slater, 2009; Taylor, 2002; Turkle, 1984; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Yee, 2005, 2006a; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee et al., 2007). Nick Yee, John Cabiria, Sherry Turkle, and others have shown that avatars can influence user behaviors essentially saying that users act differently when in avatar-places. SL avatars also have distinct themes, exude an atmosphere when engaged with them, carry the context of the designer/owner, and may have the capacity to overawe, as well as evoke memories, associations, and act as a state or framework where individual activity takes place. Avatars are also able to transmit the cultural intentions of their owners.

Knowingly or unknowingly, humans pause along a physical world continuum of space with each pause along a line; “a place” (Tuan, 1977). For the purpose of this work, place is not simply thought of as bordered space. Much work on place theory posits humans as bordered places moving about, learning through interaction within different environments, transcending one place while changing their “me place.” I consider place as fluid and contextual, comingling with me, changing with time. When I learn about myself in one place, it carries over influencing action in other places such as work, home, church groups, professional organizations, or on the street or places in which I feel safe. I am never able to return to an exact place because each time I return I am different,

changed through my interaction with my environment. Through analysis of my experiences, this dissertation suggests that avatar as place of education connects to an ever-changing contextual place, avatar; that avatar as place of education increases the educative power of avatar-place; and avatar-place of education within virtual worlds.

Virtual Worlds and the Place of Avatar

Virtual worlds are 21st century places that offer physical world experiences such as friendships, concerts, housing, and unique experiences only found in cyberspace such as teleporting. In the physical world, human geographers seek to understand human/earth interactions; anthropologists seek to understand cultures; educators, learners; sociologists, society; psychologists, behaviors, and mental processes; philosophers, fundamental truths. People seek out virtual worlds for different reasons. For some, virtual worlds and avatars are not unlike symbols of imagination, dream states, religious ceremonies, peyote visions, drunken stupors, or any other means individuals have used throughout millennia mentally to withdraw from life in the physical world in favor of “living” in a world of one’s own creation (Heim, 1991; Rheingold, 1991; Schwartz 1996). Others see virtual worlds as places holding learning potential. Of particular interest to educators, researchers (Cabiria, 2008; Childs, 2010; Gee, 2007; Savin-Baden, Gourlay, & Tombs, 2010) have demonstrated virtual worlds’ merits as learning places (Clark, 2009; Jones, 2006; Yee, 2007) and virtual world players learning about *self* from their actions, reactions, and interactions as avatars in virtual worlds. Further, virtual world environments can open creative pathways for individuals to explore relationships that may influence their own physical world sense of self and/or of belonging in physical world settings (Bakardjieva, 2003; Barnes & Pressey, 2011). Engaging in social relationships within

supportive environments prompts many to join virtual-world social groups comprised of players with similar interests (Riegle & Matejka, 2006; Watson & Johnson, 1972).

Researchers recognize virtual worlds as places (Adams, 1997; Bishop, 2008; Goel, Johnson, Junglas, & Ives, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003; Jones, 2006) and more recently, educators have come to recognize virtual worlds, online learning sites, and virtual world educational games and virtual worlds as legitimate places of education (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005; Steinkuehler & Chmiel, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Wastiau, Kearney, & Van den Berghe, 2009, Williamson, Squire, Halverson & Gee, 2005) but have not yet explored avatar as place of education from a user perspective. Avatars give me a place to live an imagined life, different than my physical world. In my avatar, I see a body made to my specifications and live in community with other avatars as I choose. My avatar is not an escape mechanism, in her I learn about myself.

Research on youth participating in online, the Internet, or virtual world activities many of whom identify themselves as social outcasts unable to fit their social structures reveal they transfer meaningful online experiences to their physical world activities. This documenting of experience transfer creates questions: How do the avatar-places one has created, assembled and participated in online influence how people perceive themselves in the physical world? Additionally, how do people perceive themselves in physical world educational places not simply in classrooms (Cabiria, 2007; Handwerk, 2012; Taylor, 2011, Yee, 2007)?

Credibility in Context

*“As you play a multi-faceted role as researcher,
informant, and author, you should be reminded that
your story is never in a vacuum and others are always
visible or invisible participants in your story.”*

Chang, 2008, p. 69

In all things “research,” criteria exist for judging a study’s quality and credibility. Paramount to understanding credibility is to understand the underlying threads, “intellectual rigor, professional integrity and methodological competence” (Patton, 2002, p. 70). As a researcher, I am trained in qualitative methods, analysis and presentation of data. Such training incorporates professional integrity and intellectual rigor. Throughout my work, I attempted to maintain honesty in my analyses of the data. There is confusion with assessing qualitative research as a whole because there is a lack of uniform criteria often found in traditional quantitative methods (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research approaches are subjective and humanistic consequently making data analysis interpretive. In forms such as autoethnography, boundaries dissipate as the researcher is the focus of the study, that which is studied, and the one who studies. Analysis becomes an artful dance of shifting between self and others (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography is also a powerful tool for developing a deep understating of the topic with potential to transform researcher and reader (Chang, 2008). Reading and writing autoethnography is a self-reflective experience. While reading the work of others, I often found myself reflecting on my own life’s experiences. Given that challenges exist in assessing the credibility of autoethnography in a research world steeped in positivism,

a first step is choosing among multiple published criteria to select evaluative methods appropriate to one's methodology (Chang, 2008; Cresswell, 2013; Mayan, 2009). This autoethnography is a journey of twists and turns informed by my retrospective and selective writing exploring and constructing my experiences as a child, adult, educator, online researcher, and gamer. Readers have access to my lived experiences. They are highly personal, sensitive and sometimes painful issues offering an understanding of my position while adding to a broader understanding of a marginalized self-in-culture. This somewhat messy approach provides the reader grounding for my diverse experiences while traversing the multi-layered entities of media, culture, and identity performance.

While considering the advantages of autoethnography, I also considered problem areas and pitfalls. Subsequently, I employed Chang's (2008) list of the benefits and pitfalls authors should avoid in this research arena to evaluate my autoethnographic research. Chang defines five pitfalls;

“(1) excessive focus on self in isolation of others, (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source, (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding other in self-narratives, and (5) inappropriate application of the label ‘autoethnography’ (p.54)”.

While these guidelines helped me assess my work, Chang's dismissal of memory and recall as a legitimate data source is at odds with my work. Like the resources Ellis and Bochner (2000) use, my memories and the use of journals and pictures as memory prompts are part of the rich fabric of this work.

In addressing Chang's first two pitfalls concerned with a researcher's excessive personal focus without sufficient analysis and awareness of cultural context, I examined my writing by paying attention to the intent of my methodology. My work is an evocative autoethnography (Patton, 2002). However, I was cognizant of my distain for self-absorbed overly dramatic, narcissistic writing. I continually scrutinized my writing knowing that my life may not interest others to the extent it interests me (Anderson, 2006; Holt, 2003; Löwenheim, 2010). I used a mix of artistic and evocative representations to bring the reader a "feeling dimension" of truth and reality (Patton, 2002; p. 548), and wove theory, research literature, cultural analysis with my memory work. Though I utilized creative means and aesthetic quality taking certain liberties in my representations, I employed interpretive vitality (vigorously supported explanations) in my analysis (Patton, 2002). The artistic combined with analysis makes autoethnography a powerful and unique tool for understanding social context (Ellis, 2009).

I connected with a broader culture by drawing on my experiences. In so doing, I can contextually connect myself with similar others (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wolcott, 2004). However, experiences are complex. Memory is not linear; memories are flawed because of unpredictable distortions of the past (Chang, 2008). Chang's thinking suggests a positivist view that memories do not offer a level of measurable truth. Because my work uses selective stories from memories as glimmers and narrations of my past, they also construct new meaning. Chang's notion of "distortions" fall outside the epistemological framing of my work. To take Chang's pitfall, "exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source" (Chang, 2008, p. 54) into account, however, I was vigilant in writing and exploring, steadfastly focusing on meaning by

choosing stories and words carefully to convey the cultural aspects (Ethno) of my autobiographical narration. As part of my work, I used memory work, observation, media artifacts, field notes, and transcript excerpts.

I believe my story details offer a particular truth while also knowing that there are other truths and other details of the same story purposely left out. To avoid pitfall four, “negligence of ethical standards regarding other in self-narrative” (Chang, 2008; p. 54). I “attended carefully to persons in the context of settings” (Patton, 2002; p. 571). I chose relevant personal stories protecting intimate details through artistic license and using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. When working with previous pilot study data, I adhered to the standard of the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements on researching human subjects. I admittedly chose certain story details to frame contexts but did not change the broader meaning by omitting other details. What may have been insignificant as a single event can take on a profound meaning when thought about collectively as an aesthetic experience.

Chang’s (2008) final pitfall is the inappropriate use of the term autoethnography (p. 54). The experiential data in this research project is processed and analyzed through my particular cultural experiences and identity at different levels and in a variety of ways. These connections are key to separating autoethnography from other forms of narrative research. This research became emancipatory and transformative for me. Through this process, I attempted to provide accounts of the information (Creswell, 2009).

In addition to telling in and showing through my identity development, autoethnography as a research tool may help others experience similar epiphanies, promote insight and foster interpretation (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010; Patton, 2002). I

delivered my perspective in an authentic voice illuminating my development and desire to improve the lives of others. This work has value because I am a participant in the cultures I researched. My experiences in the culture under study positioned me as a researcher and researched, insider and outsider offering another perspective on established truths (Ellis, 2004; Patton, 2002). It required online and offline observation, critique, analysis, and synthesis of settings, and situations of physical and virtual world participants. My experiences along this journey are a way of sharing, explaining and teaching about LGBTQ issues and findings through a narrow lens of one positioned subject, me. It is my hope that my positioning offers insight into my LGBTQ identity and broader heteronormative culture and design constraints for readers and researchers alike.

CHAPTER V

FINAL REFLECTIONS: MEANING AND DISCOVERIES

Teaching was at the heart of a long multi-faceted career forging paths and pushing against the class ceilings in education (coaching), utility work, and environmental health and safety. During my time completing coursework in educational studies, creativity and qualitative research I became aware of LGBTQ youth issues. I was amazed to find that youth suicide among LGBTQ youth was higher than for straight youth. Research on and about LGBTQ youth in school offered a preponderance of data showing that school officials and staff often failed to act when obvious LGBTQ harassment and bullying took place during school. In addition, in-school organizations that were welcoming to LGBTQ youth were not widespread and in some ways repressive to youth uncomfortable with or unknowing about their sexuality (GLSEN 2010, 2014; PEW, 2015). To my dismay, the Stonewall revolution moved culture but yielded little progress in LGBTQ equality. During the same time period I was also engaged in online gaming and exploring virtual worlds. In one such virtual world, Second Life, I lived *out* as Lesbian. In SL as

in MMORPGS, avatar affordances gave players an ability to customize their avatars. However, most customizations were limited to simple changes based on female/male binary and the social context of the game design. I read about online games and virtual world research realizing a gap existed in studies about personal choices in player representations, avatars. I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in educational studies with my focus on gaming and LGBTQ issues.

Doctoral work in educational technology heightened my awareness that avatar design may not support or accommodate player needs in general (color, text styles, character body type, communications, and movements) and more specifically, avatar designs did not accommodate gender or sexual orientation. I found that for me, my avatar customizations did not meet my needs. Living out as Lesbian in SL gave me opportunities to explore life safely, a luxury not available to me in my physical world, even while I grappled with the affordances constitutive of SL. I unknowingly was learning about myself in ways I had not experienced. I became more comfortable with myself in physical world settings. Maybe it was the freedom to discuss openly with others in SL, or a sense belonging or being a part of a larger community or learning to negotiate in straight venues that led to my physical world confidence. I wondered if online avatars might offer the same for others marginalized by society?

My Turn:

After every educational milestone or success that I experienced one or both of my parents or grandparents would remind me of my roots, “Remember where you come from.” It was a lesson in humility and a solid grounding in my family culture. Those

words are fitting on another level too. When I think about the opportunity afforded me in this autoethnography, I cannot help but think about, where I come from.

Forty plus years ago, I was pushing against patriarchal norms that kept female workers in low paying jobs and girls in unequal school activities and sports. I was unaware that other strong women were righting the inequality in politics and the Academy redefining research and fighting for change in the basic structures of oppression. The feminist movement in the 1960s had little to do with me, or so I thought. My perception at the time was that the movement was a group for privileged elitists, not like any of the females in my life. In my family women worked and to some extent this meant they did what they wanted. But make no mistake, this was not feminism, this was need. It was the way women in my family “made do” or a means of “getting by” in the era of patriarchal hegemony. This was food on the table in an immigrant family. I used to wonder why they had to do all they did in uncomfortable high-heels and dresses, I now understand. Forty plus years later, my first readings of feminist scholarship came as assignments during my master’s and doctoral programs. It was not until I delved into feminist literature that I could appreciate the feminist voices that challenged the norms of male-dominated science and knowledge (Dale Spender, Sandra Harding, Carol Gilligan, Donna Haraway, or Lorraine Code). Another diverse group of women added their voices taking up the work of defining and deconstructing institutional power structures not only for women but for all marginalized by the hegemonic and patriarchal norms. All were connected by common threads, to trouble notions of the private and public spheres unraveling a tightly woven web of male domination. (Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, Virginia Woolf, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde). Influenced by this wide

range of feminist scholarship it seemed obvious that the nature of social reality and social science would be challenged as well.

Boundaries within qualitative research broadened to include feminist approaches. What does “post” qualitative research look like after the many turns? Lather and St. Pierre have written that we often find it “difficult to think outside our training”, as such, “we bring tradition with us into the new” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 630). Qualitative work is the result of a long ongoing battle to break from positivist methods.

Autoethnography evolved as one of the interpretive forms within the overarching qualitative methodology. Richardson’s (1994) work on writing as “a method of inquiry” lays the groundwork for understanding writing as a “way of finding out” something or a way of “thinking about” something rather than writing as a tool to communicate something we already know. Writing becomes the act of learning and of teaching.

Self-Representation

This autoethnography has its foundation in women and gender studies and gaming technology. I examined one aspect of gaming, the avatar as *place* for creativity, learning about identity and negotiation. I linked my experience negotiating life in a double bind as gay outsider mired in straight culture through analysis as lesbian, educator, and gamer. I chose memory work in a retrospective and non-linear framing of heteronormativity to- and-from- and in different contexts.

At times, scratching scabs off old wounds. I struggled to narrate personally painful stories to underscore my research and connect them through personal narratives while doing so as a sound, well-adjusted socially functioning adult. A particularly challenging analysis was connecting my story with current research on LGBTQ school

climate while painfully reliving parts of my closeted adolescent years facing suicide, family isolation, church rejection, and subsequent aloneness. Reading about current LGBTQ literature comparing research to my experiences and wondering why ubiquitous bullying and harassment still exists in schools made me angry. I attempted to corral my anger and write reflectively from my position in the research process.

Self-Queering

Last week, Saturday, June 11, 2016, my partner and I were discussing Pride celebrations thinking that we would attend a local celebration this year. We chatted over breakfast reminiscing about the first pride parade and wondering if there were plans for a national celebration commemorating the 50th anniversary of Stonewall. We had read that the Stonewall Inn folks were attempting to have the inn put on the National Register of Historic Places and discussed going to NYC for the anniversary parade. On Sunday, June 12, 2016, my day began without incident. I got up at my usual time, quietly opened the doors and windows then took a walk-about the yard with our three dogs. After a quiet walk outside, I came back to the house, poured a cup of coffee and flipped on the living room TV to my favorite Sunday morning channel. From the kitchen I could see a night scene with scores of flashing lights interrupting the darkness. Since it was daylight, I thought to myself that something happened last night. As I walked closer I could see the scrolling marquee at the bottom of my TV screen reporting numbers of injured and dead. I turned up the volume to hear the newscaster. When I realized what was happening in Orlando, a violent attack on gay men of color at a popular bar, flashbacks to my youth and of the personal horrors I witnessed in the gay bar scenes overwhelmed me. I felt a sadness beyond tears. A protective numbness came over me, I felt nothing. I watched and

listened in dismay as the various personnel announced the updates on what had happened at the Pulse Bar in Orlando, Fla. My partner came in and as we sat together motionless and speechless I flipped through TV channels looking for additional information. The first reports were that it might be a random terrorist attack then we learned that it was a hate crime.

Over the course of the next week I listened to officials speak about the horrific act, the killer's intentions, what might have been going on in his head. It seemed as if the word tolerance was used in every broadcast. The problem with tolerance is that the term is used as if it were the end result rather than a means of civil discourse to open a path to understanding and acceptance. I watched the bios of the dead and injured and wondered why. Why again and again do I hear lip service about the LGBTQ community and our rights and needs only to open an insurance billing to see my named category as "wife" to my partner or why were there only two check boxes on our legal Oklahoma state marriage license, male #1 or female #2? Why must I go to a "gay" bar to dance, show affection to my partner and openly meet friends? Why have at least ten of our United States legislatures drafted or passed anti-LGBTQ legislation in the past year? The spirit of the hate-filled actions at the Pulse are all around us. We have been lulled into thinking that things are better in the 21st century than in the days of Stonewall. As my numbness wears off and pain brings with it tears for Pulse and my own memories, I think of the fear I felt as a teen chancing my safety to be with friends in gay bars then watching the police perpetrate the violence in the 1969 raid at Stonewall. Those early experiences forced me into the closet. Advances in technology gave the world instant access to the terror, pain and death in Orlando and, as always throughout history, the LGBTQ community was

targeted and marginalized by violence. How different it was this time, in today's culture the police were the protectors and the hope for those trapped. Straight and gay prayed together and supporters stood in angel costumes during funerals to keep out those who came to protest us. We are resilient and will overcome this latest hateful act. The haters on social media and in church pulpits are being challenged by scores of people standing in solidarity with the LGBTQ community. At least 50,000 friends stood strong at one of the many prayer vigils. From my vantage point these showings of support feel like too little too late, for LGBTQ youth it may be a new beginning.

In this dissertation I confronted my lesbianism, questioning self-representation in a straight world, social aspects of MMORPGs and VW's and family relationships that had been private and protected for most of my life. I reflected on my first life marginalization analyzing educational experiences in school, early adulthood, teaching, and later transformative queer experiences through the Internet then MMORPGs and VWs. Through this gradual *coming out* process I experienced a personal redefining of myself as queer. Sharing my stories, my experiences and those of my pilot study participants created a backdrop for self-learning. I offered readers my personal accounts to better elucidate issues in education, gaming and my view of an *othered* side of society. By demonstrating avatar-place making and avatars-place as means of learning about negotiating forms of power, mandatory game character affordances, social and moral design constraints and physical world sex and gender norms.

Avatar-Place

Place shapes who we are and what we think because it is where we live physically and emotionally (Relph, 1976). The banal everydayness of living in our world, our

personal creativity, and connectedness to our environment makes the defining place as a single concept impractical if not impossible. My interaction with other avatars demonstrated that virtual worlds in general, and avatars, in particular, have features found in place-making discourse. My avatar-place demonstrated distinct themes, atmospheres, contextually related artifacts, the capacity to overawe, power to evoke memory, transmit cultural intentions (individual and *social* bodies) offering frameworks for individual/communal activity (Champion, 2010). I realized that spending time in in SL satisfied Massey's notion of place as unbounded space. Creating my SL avatars met Agnew's "place" criteria; specific location-where in relation to everywhere else, defined borders, and sense of place. I demonstrated that avatars were in specific locations and that it was "there", that avatars had "shape" (defined borders) associated with daily activities, and a personal and emotional attachment to a place (sense of place). I demonstrated through personal experiences that avatar-places like physical world places take shape as we make meaning of our world through experiences and interactions with our environments.

Rethinking Design Codes

I guided readers through a journey that intersected virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online role-playing games avatar experiences with my physical world experiences. Living as lesbian in physical world settings places *me* on a border looking in at straight society. My personal framework became a unique perspective because I do not subscribe to most heteronormative social codes and in particular to gender and sexual identity codes. Contemporary avatars offer high graphics 21st-century game designs. I developed an acute awareness of game design affordances, constraints, and conventions. I

realised that a carry-over exists in virtual world designs too and that in one VW I could comfortably live *out* while in an MMORPG I had to live *closeted*. For technology to be successful, it must be usable (Norman, 2013). I discovered that all too often, MMORPGs and VW avatar designs may or may not support or accommodate players' needs. Even though my avatar was customizable, I had to step outside the design affordances to satisfy my body-type needs.

I experienced a relationship with my avatars in ways that led to self-understanding and personal confidence. I used my avatar-places for exploring and learning about the self. These avatar-places helped me to project and situate my physical world and virtual world self-learning and self-acceptance. Living in my avatar gave me a confidence I had not experienced in physical world settings. I was more comfortable defining myself as one who was cautiously living out rather than closeted.

A View From the Other Side(s)

As a Lesbian learner, game and educator, I came to understand the need and advantages of LGBTQ welcoming school organizations like GSA and other Ally organizations. I also realized that such organizations can act in opposition becoming unfriendly and at times unsafe places when school climate or family situations are less than fertile ground for success. This work crossed physical world identity borders into virtual worlds focusing on virtual world avatars. Avatars do not free us from physical world bodies; they are deliberately created techno-gendered, techno-sexed places from which to practice identity. I am convinced that humans have a relationship and part of their technologies in the cyborgian sense. Creating my 21st century virtual world avatar(s) was a constant (re)negotiation and (re)representation of my coming out identity

because of age, gender, sexuality and able-ness design limitations. Though my avatars became negotiated forms of visual writings or embodied public statements about me, the standardized and accepted personal affordances (avatar design) game design were invisible obstructions quietly enforcing heteronormativity. I felt emotional and frustrated when accepted game conventions seemed to perpetuate physical world traditions (gender norms, aesthetics, sexuality). Even so, for me, SL opened creative pathways for me to explore my identity through my avatar and offered potential for learning about myself and how I interact socially.

CHAPTER VI

NEW JOURNEYS: EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

*“One has to push one’s work as far as one can go:
to the borderlines, where one never stops, walking
on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling
off onto side or the other side of the limit while
undoing, redoing, modifying this limit.”*

Minh-ha, 1992, p.218

Reflecting on similarities and differences living as and in an avatar is an approach and orientation for avatar place-making. My avatar-place demonstrated a potential for learning about one’s self in context to the surrounding world. My use of the “I” positionality in time and context coupled with analysis adds another dimension to research in and on VWs. My journey through pain, confusion, anger, uncertainty, joy, happiness and freedom from harm is significant. MMORPGs and VWs were positive outlets for me and great places for learning about myself. We are at the end of my journey in this autoethnographic project and at the beginning of additional paths. I weave in suggestions for future travels along the paths of current theories game design, social science research, educational practice and curriculum.

Feminist by design

When I first started thinking about gaming, the prospect of crossing lines of demarcation regarding such features as quests, tasks, or fantasy themes created a nagging question for me. With player enrollment in the millions, online gaming is ubiquitous these days. When gamers cross game borders and genres in this emerging global community, is there a common thread? The answer is no, but research literature makes compelling arguments that desire for social interaction, belonging, and community play an important role in player satisfaction. More importantly, are there any unexpected consequences of heteronormative design? Is there a hidden cultural curriculum?

In my case I demonstrated that certain design conventions and constraints in SL (age, (dis)ability, race, gender, sex) created opportunities for players to subvert design codes by creating, sharing, or selling *skins* to better meet the needs of some players. What might a feminist design model look like? There are more than one-hundred and fifty-five million players worldwide (ESA, 2014). Females currently comprise the majority of gamers but males comprise the majority of gamers who purchase. Game developer numbers are skewed with only twenty-two percent of game developers identifying as female and two percent identifying as transgender (IGDA, 2015). Adding feminist interpretations about agency, empowerment, identity, social justice and equality in design processes will expose an unspoken curriculum (unintentional consequences) similar to those I described earlier. Thoughtful integration of feminist ideals at every stage of development, including marketing will make gaming more socially inclusive.

Facing Interfaces:

“Design is really an act of communication, which means having a deep understanding of the person with whom the designer is communicating.”

Don Norman (2013)

Limited avatar customization is one shortcoming in most games. Game and VW avatars directly influence player experiences-players who are comfortable in their game space play longer. My avatar is important for my overall VW experience. Recent work in HCI suggests that theoretical frameworks for avatar customization and more robust character creation interface scholarship is in the-here-and-now (Antonenko, Dawson, & Shilpa, N.D.; McArthur, Jenson, 2014). However, avatar interfaces remain understudied. For avatars to be effective places for learning about identity avatar interfaces (function, behavioral, structural) need not be exclusive. Since interfaces are fundamental design tools all players use to create character identities, personal choice must meet the needs of all players not only in skin tone and anthropometric style but gender/sex as well. A theoretical shift in thinking from traditional quantitative values used in affordances like slides, buttons and drop-down menus for bodies, body parts, skin and so forth might better serve players if they included ways of combining attributes much like a color circle. Even though such choices will never mirror real worlds, they expand the worlds available to users. Designers must structure Interface mapping so hierarchical design structure does not privilege more experienced players excluding newbies or those who are less savvy (McArthur, Teather & Jenson, 2015).

Extending Curriculum: Practicing Culture In Virtual Worlds

*“Culture is the medium through which children
fashion their individual and collective
identities and learn in part how to narrate
themselves in relation to others.”*

Henry Giroux (1997, p. 59)

Giroux positions media at the core of cultural identity (Giroux, 1997). What if schools could use mediated environments (VWs and MMOPRGs) for learning about identity? The literature and my experiences in the present study support that avatars help youth. Might VWs be added to school curriculum adding a dimension to learning about identity? My experiences offer educators and designers different perspectives about the needs of those marginalized.

Why do I suggest that avatars, as part of MMORPGs and VWs, are good for schools? Primarily, it is about the game structures that supports avatar development. It is known in formal education that social aspects and working together towards common goals creates rich learning environments. MMORPGs and VWs allow avatars where students can benefit from solo or group work and fail safely. It is because we have such relationships with our technology that games and virtual worlds are a fitting addition to school curriculum. Such places where players can engage socially with others in online ways hold potential for positive transfer into school work and social growth. The average player is under thirty-five and has played for at least thirteen years (IGDA, 2015). Commercial games and virtual worlds are gaining momentum in schools, and Avatars are an

under-recognized tool of learning in such environments. A number of universities and learning labs (commercial and educational) offer assistance and support to teachers through in-service, helpdesks, free games and webinars as well as courses designed for educational games design. Additionally, a number of game engines are available for use in schools for those wishing to design in-house games or class projects. The NEA's 21st century skills movement the "Four Cs" (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) combined with the NEA's partnerships with P21 developed a framework for learning. Games and virtual worlds meet many of the 21st century skills criteria; critical thinking, problem solving, global awareness, creativity and innovation, and a number of literacies (civic, health, environments). Included in the P21 framework is reference to educational technology citing that educational technology offers key design features, extends affordances, constraints and conventions adding additional levels of usability that include among others, personalization and socialization affordances. The latter directly influences avatar usability and customization giving students the means to experience a range of diverse experiences. Avatars do not free us from our physical world bodies but they offer us a different way of meaning making in particular about the complexities of identify and negotiating relationships, sexuality, and gender. Avatars are places for students to learn about self-creating and self-knowledge. They offer a *thereness* adding a diversity to the schooling community beyond clubs and sports through practice in intentional communities. For the marginalized, the loner, the bullied, the questioning or fearful student VWs hold promise because avatars can be whomever they wish to be. Most importantly, and avatars are places to fail in safety—and fail gloriously.

MMORPGs and virtual worlds are gaining momentum in schools. Virtual worlds are not considered games though they imply play in a gameful experience created using a wide range of affordances. The most important of these are opportunities to experience the freedom to fail, experiment and fashion identities (Bruner, 1983). Educational games and game based learning used in schooling draw varied responses from school personnel and parents. Factions are often at odds and split into two dispositions; one group sees gaming as 21st century skills; the other group argues such gaming takes away from traditional academic subject matter (Klopfer, Osterweil & Salen, 2009). VWs like MMORPGs teach 21st century educational skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, global awareness, and civic, health and environmental literacies, creativity and innovation (Klopfer, Osterweil & Salen, 2009; P21, 2016). The need for 21st Century Educational Technology skills addresses key design features extend affordances, constraints and conventions adding additional level of usability that include, among other, personalization and socialization affordances (P21, 2016). A number of universities and commercial game groups are developing player needs frameworks, avatar interfaces and educational support sites.

Concluding Musings:

This dissertation did not present the salacious sides of gaming, addictions, dangerous places, social withdrawal, or predatory practices associated with online use (Kaplan & Moss, 2003; Young 2009). School officials, teachers, and parents may not fully understand the benefits because of publicity about the negative sides of non-educational gaming or the argument about games in context to the overall purpose of schooling. For these reasons, there are mixed opinions about using non-educational

virtual 3D environments virtual worlds in schools despite student social networking and gaming outside of school settings. Software and game developers offer schools locally controlled gaming servers adding layers of safety for in-school use (Klopfer, 2015). Another drawback to in-school use of virtual worlds is teacher preparation. As a member of a pre-service teaching team, I had firsthand experience with aspiring teachers, many of whom were not gamers nor had any interest in gaming beyond the simple, what I call, video workbook games. My College of Education required technology courses and creativity courses where students could review and play educational games but not commercial virtual worlds. One issue about many commercial games is the lack of teacher control, though the trend is changing. Less control is better for the very reasons that *closets* and other stereotypes exist.

Simulation is already a widely-accepted mode of adult education in healthcare, aviation, and manufacturing. Such approaches are particularly valuable, cost-efficient and safe in technical fields where equipment changes frequently or students can practice skills without harming humans or machines. Gaming in school settings is breaking the traditional mode of learning in schools. Minecraft is an example of how a virtual world designed and marketed for entertainment can be launched successfully in a school setting and with positive outcomes including opportunities to fail in a safe environment where consequences of failure are not in socially stressful settings or harmful.

Why is this information about the avatar choices in virtual worlds important? Activity theory purports that our minds are products of interaction with people and artifacts in the context of everyday activities (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). We have a relationship with our technology. McLuhan and Powers theoretical model for assessing,

analyzing and predicting the social effects of technology on society is a tool for discussing effects in the human/technology relationship or the effect particular technologies have on society (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). As a cognitive model, it is used to refine, focus, and discover unknown and unobserved entities in cultures and technologies. Might this tool be refocused to extend ways of analyzing avatars?

Virtual worlds and games like WoW are vibrant, interactive and growing. The SIMS library (teen genre) had eight SIMS in the top twenty games of 2014. Sims games are like training wheels for SL. They are simulations rather than true virtual worlds. In the category ages ten and above, Minecraft rated in the top five with Disney's sandbox game Disney Infinity 2.0 coming in at number fifteen (ESA, 2015). WoW and other such games may suit certain players, but there is no such description for an average player. Players in virtual worlds can employ different identities in each game depending on the underlying game structure. When I am a bovine giant whose role is to be advisor I am very different from the knight I play in a game where I am a leader destroying dragons, or when I'm kicked back in SL listening to a concert. I frequent virtual worlds where my needs are met including emotional needs. Though games dictate how I adjust my behaviors when I negotiate identity to fit my character, an avatar is the greatest single commonality across my varied game play. How I experience my identity in each avatar-place teaches me about facets of my identity, as it might for others. She intensifies those parts of my culture I wish to experience. I learn through game and virtual worlds participation and personal assessment of my choices and actions.

Avatars are places. They have location, power to evoke memory; they transmit cultural intentions (individual and social bodies) they are in community with others. They

offer a sense of thereness, of me being *there* in my avatar. Such thereness is a potential for adding diversity to schooling community beyond organized physical world clubs or sports through practice in intentional communities. Identity negotiation is lifelong. Avatars provide one place to practice and learn about that negotiation. We need diverse tools to serve a variety of people's needs. Marginalization forces nonconforming youth to the edge of what mainstream youth take for granted, school community. MMOPRGs, RPG, SIMS, and virtual worlds allow users to create avatar-places where they might learn. Such worlds also offer environments where avatars belong to intentional communities. Such communities can serve youth much like youth groups and GSA's.

Virtual worlds are intentional communities designed, and for the most part, open to all. Virtual worlds like SL meet my need to feel safe when I choose to be *out*. I ask readers to consider the difference between virtual worlds and MMORPGs and the need to learn 21st Century Skills then ask why learning about identity is not included but simply an afterthought. As Gray (2007) describes plights and successes of rural LGBTQ youth relating online and offline in the South, Mayo (2013) expresses designated LGBTQ online places as normative suggesting that site specific LGBTQ sites commodify *queer*. Open virtual worlds have risks but so does real world living queer. Avatars are fluid places of identity moving within a simulation safely negotiating the online terrain, a place where you are free to gloriously and live your dream safely.

Avatars do not free us from our physical world bodies they are connected to us. They offer us a different way to make meaning about the complexities of indemnity and negotiating relationships, sexuality and gender. For the marginalized, the loner, the bullied or fearful person, VWs hold promise differently. What I may dream is a silent

prising singular event. Life in my avatar is a sustained experience. Avatar-place has educational value as self-education, self-creation, and self-knowledge. In my experience, I created a digital body aligned with dominant gender norms in a cultural setting safer and more permissible than my physical world. In my avatar, I found a sustainable place to test the complexity of my identity before wearing it openly in my first life.



Figure 8. No Longer a Red Head

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APPENDIX

GLOSSARY

Avatar (Avi). A player's digital representation in a game world.

Affordance/Affordance Theory. Affordances are naturally occurring relationships between a learner and an environment (Gibson, 1977). For instance, a door knob invites turning, a light switch moves up and down, or a chain dangling from an overhead fan invites pulling. Originally, introduced as a learning theory (Gibson (1977), affordance theory posits that users make meaning of the world based on an object's possibilities for action. Norman extended Gibson's work adding that affordances are real and perceived by the user.

Co-creative world. Is a virtual world or online computer environment in which users participate as players with game designers. Designers engage in a creative construction process of that world.

Co-creative aspects. Are affordances written into game interfaces allowing players to modify characters or overall game environments such as living spaces, seasons, times of day. All MMORPG, MOW, and VW environments offer users the ability to create; however Virtual Worlds such as Second Life are unique in that participating in the environment are not outcome based, e.g. winning, losing, counting objects, completing quests, etc.

Constraint. Is a human-computer interaction design concept. Constraints are in relation to affordances and conventions. Constraint prevents a user from completing a task. Constraints bring order to a game but pose challenges, potentially diminishing gameplay experience for users. Negative play experiences may influence user intrinsic motivation to return to the game. Examples include employing icons or words unrecognizable to the users, or coded commands without simple user interfaces such as mouse-overs, sounds, colors, and others. Common design constraints in everyday communication and game technology are 255-word characters in text messages. In the case of the text messages, users began to circumvent the constraint forming codes to shorten longer words and phrases (LOL-laughing out loud). Others are unchangeable fonts gender specific game areas a specific number of pictures one may upload on a given site. Users create collage pictures to circumvent server imposed picture constraints; purchasing skins changes in SL changes my appearance in gendered areas within SL.

Convention. Is a design concept preventing certain practices and encouraging other practices. Game developers create hierarchical structures based on stories, narratives, or pre-determined design. Conventions are forms of design controls in each game that players learn. Logical conventions dictate most people are right handed. Therefore, scrollbars appear on the right side of computer screens. Maneuvering the mouse to move the tab on the scroll bar is a learned convention. If a user attempts mouse movement on another part of the screen, the user would not have the same result. Subtle conventions exist in game codes moving play and

players beyond aesthetics or kinesthetic coding. Culturally-based learned actions, rules which players obey as a condition of play, politics in the context of games in which enemies are killed, cultural practice regarding how designers and game developers require players to act, and even community practice created by players immersed in a game community.

Cyberspace. In its common usage is the term that refers to the internet's virtual environment of information and interactions between people (Gibson, 1984).

Graphical User Interface (GUI). Is a custom package that acts as a skin cover "skinning", or overlay on a computer program. A GUI allows a user interface to change program elements, often known as the 'look and feel' in computer programs. Skinning can be understood as a pre-set package of choices for a user including themes, functionality, and visuals. Users are able to manipulate GUI package elements such as changing appearances of their desktop view or selecting email note papers.

Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). Human-computer interaction is a discipline concerned with the design, evaluation and implementation of interactive computing systems for human use and with the study of major phenomena surrounding them" (Hewett et al., 1992).

Metaverse. Is the concept of an extended internet. Multiple virtual environments link to form a virtual universe. Metaverse was first introduced by Neal Stephenson in his science fiction novel, *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992).

Massively Multi-Player

Multiplayer Online World (MOW). Are computer-based, mostly 3D-simulated environments. These terms are largely associated and often synonymous to online

environments in which users take an avatar form visible to other users. MOWs can be commercial or open source. For the purpose of this work, MOWs are commercially available, computer-controlled environments created by designers create and managed by owners.

Norman, Don. Is best known for his book “The Design of Everyday Things” (Norman, 2013). Norman considers ‘good design’ in ‘human/computer interaction’ as relating to usability in system design. Norman expanded Gibson’s notion of affordance focusing on cognition applying it to everyday objects. He separated affordances into two categories, perceived and real, purporting they hold different roles in the physical world and in screen-based design (Norman, 1999).

Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). Are role-playing games designed for large numbers of players who participate simultaneously in gameplay.

Open Source Project (OSP)/ Open Source Metaverse Project (OSMP). Are individual free online digital content platforms. Both are built by independent contributors, creating a virtual world or Internet site with few rules and no oversight from corporate entities. The OSP is most often associated with peer-reviewed, scholarly journal sites and conference websites. Multiple users donate their time and expertise free of charge, in the same manner as Wiki sites. The OSMP is fashioned after commercial Metaverse engines such as Second Life, There, Active Worlds, etc. OSMP is flexible, modular and extensible (OSMP, 2006). Persons desiring to operate a Metaverse install, configure, operate and administrate server engines.

RS (Research Simnah). Is my research avatar in this project who describes her online experiences. Ram (Ram Simnah). Is RS's older sister.

Second Life (SL). Is an online virtual world developed by a San Francisco based company, Linden Lab. Second Life first launched on June 23, 2003.

Skin. Is a custom appearance designed by Second Life residents that overlay an SL element. Skins might be thought of as full body costumes. Skins do not change the underlying designer codes, like avatar gender or sex. Some skins may be purchased; some skins are free.

Transformative Learning. Are learning steps defined by Mezirow (1978) in which an initiating event conflicts person's experience with their expectation and resolution can come only by reevaluate and some type of change in their world view.

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

Token Ring. Is an early network design that graphically looked like star-shaped pattern where all computers were physically connected to each other. Token ring technology evolved into what we commonly know as LAN (local area network).

Virtual Reality (VR). Describes a wide variety of applications from online communities and Virtual Worlds to sophisticated headgear and other types of wearable tech.

VR is commonly associated with immersive, highly visual, 3D environments that may include virtual taste, sight, smell, and touch.

Virtual World. Is synonymous with MOW.

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